No. 251 / JANUARY 1994

THE NI
NEW INTERNATIONALIST

Mexico
through the Tortilla Curtain

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- **Bouncing on the water-bed** – prostitutes and the law.
- **'We are professional about preventing AIDS – are you?'** – are prostitutes health workers?
- **Turning the tables** – A brothel for women?

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Above: Pick-up bar/brothel in the slums of Manaus, Brazil.

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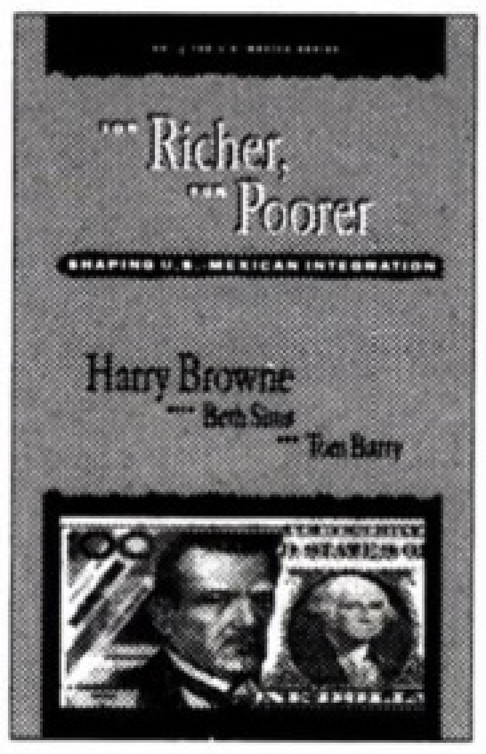

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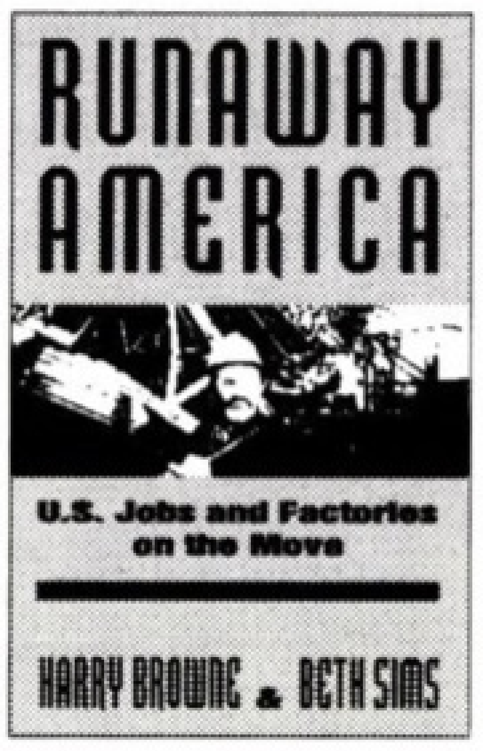
U.S. JOBS AND FACTORIES ON THE MOVE



U.S. companies are on the prowl, looking for low-cost labor abroad. Meanwhile, U.S. workers are on the ropes, and their communities are in upheaval. *Runaway America* details the grassroots struggle against deindustrialization and documents the loss of jobs from over 250 U.S. work sites as multinationals have moved to Mexico.

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FRONT COVER PHOTOGRAPH: BOY PEERING THROUGH BANNER ON A DEMONSTRATION IN MEXICO CITY, SEPTEMBER 1993, BY **DAVID RANSOM**

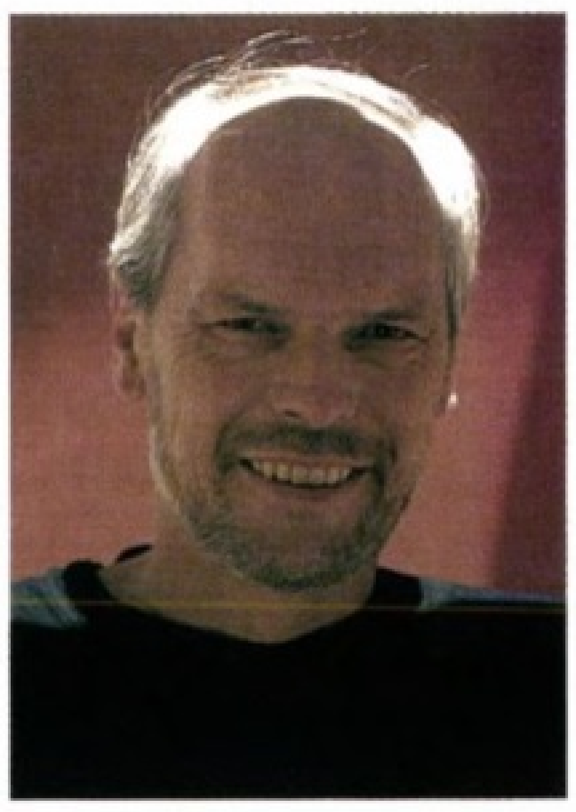
THIS MONTH'S **THEME**

Mexico

FROM THIS MONTH'S **EDITOR**

Guess who's quoting whom in the following extract: 'How right [he] was when he wrote... "...70 per cent of these people are real savages, quite as much as they were 300 years ago. The Spanish-Mexican population just rots on top of the black savage mass".'

Well, it's Graham Greene in his 1930s Mexican travel book *The Lawless Roads,* and he's quoting from DH Lawrence, who wrote his awful novel *The Plumed Serpent* in the 1920s. Lawrence had gone to Mexico convinced – for reasons best known to himself – that 'native' Mexicans must possess some kind of essential life force. Sorely disillusioned by the people he actually met, he gave vent to this racist outburst. I'd like to think that in later life Graham Greene would have disowned his endorsement of it.



As I prepared to go to Mexico the problems of prejudice struck me pretty forcefully. Two years earlier I had been to Brazil to write a magazine about the Amazon and I returned feeling that my political prejudices had been largely confirmed – a reassuring but ultimately unsatisfactory experience. This time it would be different.

It is, however, quite impossible to do a 'travelogue' magazine like this without having some preconceptions. I had to convince the rest of the **NI** co-operative at our annual editorial meeting more than a year ago that Mexico would make a good subject, then summon up the gall to go to a huge and complicated country and write the whole magazine myself.

The origins of this style of magazine at the **NI** are largely functional; the only way we could afford for editors to travel to the Third World was to save on the cost of paying other people to write for us. But the practice does have positive advantages. While normally we tackle an important theme and construct an argument with articles from around the world, in these 'country' magazines we start with a particular place and see how the themes interact on the ground, in the lives of the people we meet.

If we get it right – if we set out from roughly the same starting point as you, our readers, and take care to listen hard to the people we meet – then we can act as a bridge you can cross into a world you might otherwise not have known.

Even so, the view you get depends upon whom we choose to meet. I also looked for people I thought you might have wished to meet yourselves. Out of almost 90 million Mexicans I can't have spoken at length to more than a few dozen. But even that makes for a lot of words: listening to the tapes of our conversations afterwards I found that on average it took just 10 minutes to say 2,000 words, or the equivalent of a long feature article in the magazine. So just an hour's talk would fill an entire **NI.**

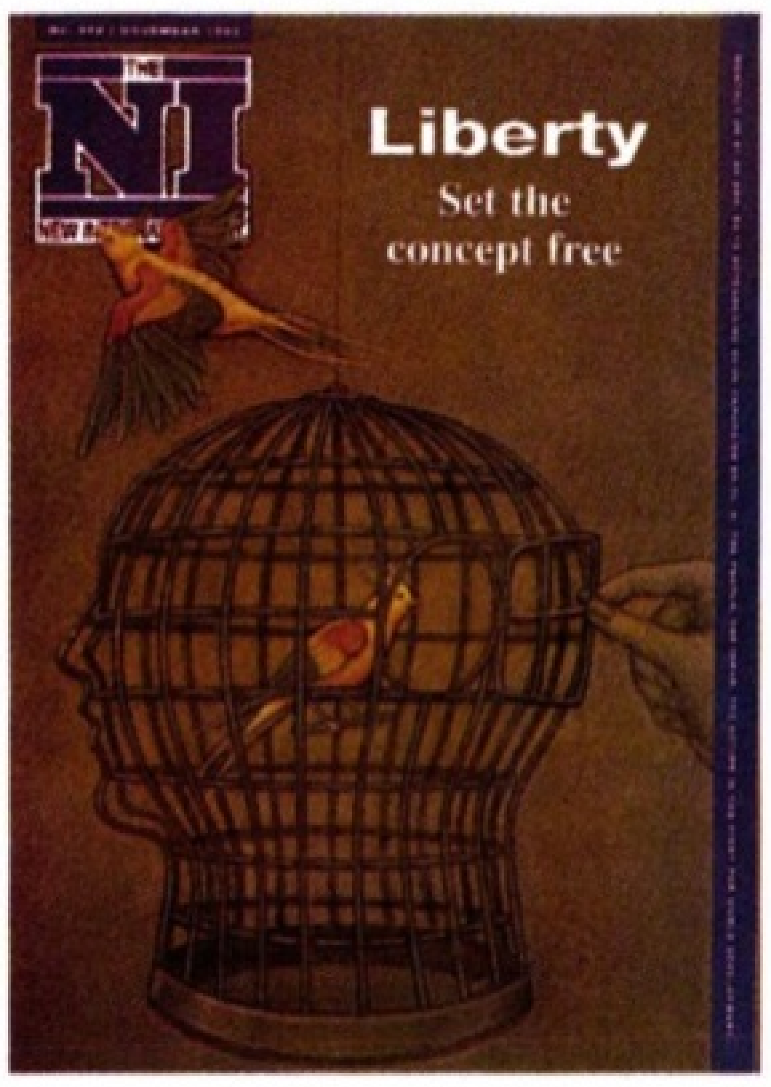
In the end I'll doubtless have to pay for the hubris of it all. But whatever the price, it will still have been worth it to spend time with such beguiling people in an enchanted place that poor old DH Lawrence and Graham Greene, blinded by prejudice, never seem to have seen.

David Ransom, ***David Ransom***
*for the **New Internationalist** Co-operative*

The **New Internationalist** welcomes your letters. But please keep them short. They may be edited for purposes of space or clarity. Include a home telephone number if possible and send your letters to the nearest editorial office. The address is inside the front cover.

Flawed evidence

The issues raised in Catherine Itzin's feature on 'Sex and Freedom' (**NI 249**) are not as clear-cut as fashion and intuition might seem to indicate. For example, women with shaved pubic hair are not always the victims of 'child pornography'. In Japan the portrayal of pubic hair in any medium is an offence and as a consequence even the sexually explicit, mutually consensual erotica of which Ms Itzin is less disapproving would have to reflect this.



A second point concerns the allegation that people were being killed in 'snuff movies'. This was first made in the 1970s by the head of an American 'Decency in Literature' organization. The FBI were called in to investigate the claims but they found no evidence and were forced to abandon the enquiry. David Friedman, producer of pornographic films, put up a $25,000 reward for anyone who could come up with evidence. It remains unclaimed.

And finally, the use of pornography by rapists and child sex abusers is undoubtedly high, but it is not clear whether sexually criminal urges lead to the consumption of pornography or the other way round. Certainly liberalization of the laws relating to pornography in Scandinavia was accompanied by no change in the rate of sexual crime, and rape is a feature less frequently seen in pornography than mainstream terrestrial TV in the UK and US.

I would support Ms Itzin's call for an end to denigration and abuse of women in a sexual setting, and a lot more mutuality and equality in sexual images but I do not think that pseudo-rational arguments and flawed 'evidence' are the best way to do this.

J S Barnett
London, UK

Grass-root change

As an ex-subscriber I found your issue on Education (**NI 248**) disappointingly familiar. To a large extent my disappointment reflects our differing interests: you say you wanted to concentrate on the economics of education, while I get excited by interesting changes and innovations. The trouble is that your approach produced the traditional **NI** conclusion that all that is evil in the world is the fault of governments and business interests, which allows your readers a rather self-indulgent wallow in indignation without being able to do anything about it.

Stories of successful educational reformers, on the other hand, illustrate what individuals can achieve, sometimes with government co-operation, but more often – and I would suggest, more interestingly – by ignoring governments and existing power-bases and working initially on a small scale to achieve grass-root change which spreads.

Heinz Hellin
Bramley, UK

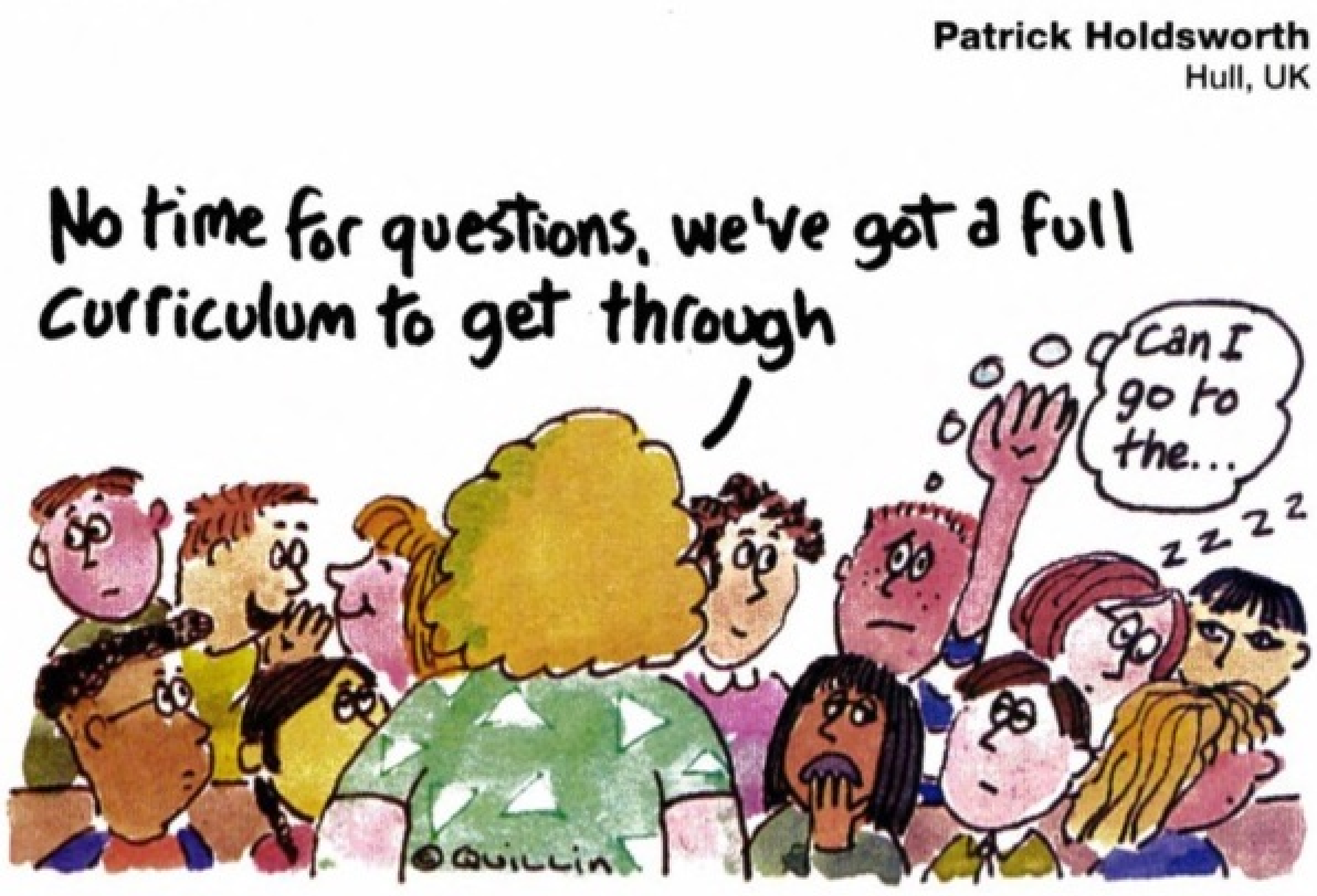
Education otherwise

I was disappointed not to see any mention of parents who choose not to send their children to school in *Back to the Drawing Board* (**NI 248**). Schooling can be, and often is, a far from liberating experience. It can be used to socialize young minds – instilling competition, using threats or bribes to teach obedience to authority, pushing a particular world view, and often crushing our natural curiosity and desire to learn.

As anyone who has ever been involved in any campaign work knows, a questioning attitude and an ability to accept new ideas are even more important than literacy. A compulsory school system is a wonderful device for the powers-that-be to produce a standardized, graded product – a population of worker-consumers who have had little chance to question the status-quo. The most inspiring projects described in October's issue were the voluntary, small-scale initiatives such as the community-schools movement in Brazil.

Anyone who wants to find out more about learning outside of a school system can get information from Education Otherwise, 25 Diabaig, Torridon, Achnasheen, Ross-shire, IV22 2HE.

Patrick Holdsworth
Hull, UK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Can I go to the...
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Positive energy

Thank you for my monthly dose of solid, positive idealism. I don't know what I would do without it. I've just spent the afternoon reading your issue on education (**NI 248**) and have emerged from it refreshed and envigorated.

Tonight I am showing a group of my pupils 'Manufacturing Consent'; a profile of Noam Chomsky. Next Thursday I am taking a group to interview and video a local organic farmer for a broadcast in the school. And next month I am taking a group to an Amnesty International conference in Birmingham. All these activities are mostly due, I'm sure, to the burst of positive energy that I get from your magazine.

Huw Peach
Shrewsbury, UK

Milked by the ilk

I note no mention in Geoff Sayer's report on East Africa (**NI 248**) of the butchery of citizenry and the draining dry of treasuries by Idi Amin and his ilk. While the governments of industrialized countries must be held responsible for inhuman economic exploitation of African (and other) deprived populaces, attention should also be drawn to the criminal support, via aid and trade, of corrupt leaders by their counterparts in the West (eg Reagan, Thatcher, Kohl, Bush etc).

Chris MacLeod
Sirdar, Canada

Science, please!

Obviously Richard Swift had to be very selective in his coverage of history (**NI 247**), but I was greatly disappointed by the absence of even a passing mention of the history of science and technology and the history of medicine, given the central roles of those disciplines in creating the problems with which the **NI** is concerned.

Over the last 40 years historians in these fields have produced some of the most radical, innovative and challenging historical work to be found anywhere. For example, they have demonstrated the extent to which 'science', far from being the embodiment of objective rationality, is always thoroughly embedded in specific socio-economic and cultural contexts. These govern and constrain not only priorities and funding but the very nature of scientific theorizing itself and the personal motivations and goals of scientists. 'Social constructionist' and feminist perspectives have been deployed with great effect-iveness in achieving this. As an antidote to patriotic and ethnocentric heroic history this wide-ranging and exciting corpus of work ought surely to have been drawn to your readers' attention? Or perhaps you are wisely planning to devote a future issue entirely to this topic? If so, all is forgiven!

Graham Richards
Tunbridge Wells, UK

Dependent Tibet

In a letter in **NI 247** headed 'Independent Tibet', the author expresses surprise that Tibet is not shown on any maps as independent of China. That is because it is not. I think Richard Whitecross could look at a very large number of maps over the last 200 years without finding one which shows Tibet independent of China.

Does this make the Western Powers' utter failure to protect the Tibetans from China's influxes, cruelty and other malpractices somewhat less dreadful than if Tibet *had* been independent? Surely we do not really believe that the Western Powers would have stood idly by and watched the 'invasion' and subsequent spoliation of Tibet if Tibet had ever been independent of China? You do really think so? Well, perhaps you are right.

Alec Vans,
Newnham, UK

Controlling shares

In response to Ruth Crossley's letter (**NI 248**) concerning multinationals and how we might best influence them by opting in, this has often seemed a good idea to me, but I suspect that it is ultimately flawed. I would like to be wrong but wouldn't such a move be useless unless the 'network of like minds' could acquire a controlling share? Highly unlikely.

Peter Corke
Watford, UK

The views expressed on the letters page are not necessarily those of the NI.

Letter from Lagos

No polish for Mercedes

Nigerian parents long for a better education for their children. But all over the country attendances are dwindling. Elizabeth Obadina reports on a fading dream.

There has been no school for primary children in my neighbourhood since last July. Pro-democracy stay-at-homes fused with the annual long vacation led straight into a teachers' strike over non-payment of salaries.

'Now we're hearing it'll be the new year before the schools re-open,' says Mamamercedes whose seven- and nine-year old sons, Eric and Sunday, attend the local primary school. Mamamercedes would prefer private schooling for her sons but her income from petty trading in groceries and her husband's as a driver just can't stretch to find the 700 *naira* ($21) per term needed to put each child through the cheapest private school.

'I'm so worried,' says Dickson, their father. 'What these boys are missing now is so much more difficult to make up when they're older. What chance had I to catch up? I want a better life for my children.'

ILLUSTRATION: MIRIAM McCURDY

Dickson believes in education. He called his baby daughter 'Mercedes' after a character in *The Count of Monte Cristo,* which he finished reading the day she was born. He shouldered a lot of teasing as a result: 'Why for you name your pikin after car?'; 'He's just hoping she'll bring her daddy plenty of money and a Mercedes of his own'.

Dickson's protestations that he named his daughter 'for book' and not 'for money', are laughed off. But most of those who tease Dickson – street traders who pause for a drink outside Mamamercedes' stall, building workers waiting to be called for a job, the unemployed whiling away time playing ludo or draughts – are also anxious about the fate of their children's education.

Primary education has been free and compulsory in western Nigeria since 1955. Lagos is used to 95 per cent of its primary children attending school. School systems used to crash in other parts of the country but never in Lagos. Now Lagos primary schools are joining the chaos. Enrolments fell two per cent between 1992 and 1993.

This figure is nothing compared to national statistics. Since 1988, when 80 per cent of eligible children were enrolled, attendances have dwindled to only 60 per cent last year.

Teachers' strikes are the immediate cause of parents' disaffection. Arbitrary education levies also discourage schooling. And there is discontent about the wretched learning environment of primary schools everywhere in Nigeria. Most are tin-roofed shelters in varying stages of decay. Few have toilets and those which do are in such a foul state as to discourage use. Classrooms lack electricity and water. When the sun shines the children bake. When the rain falls they cannot hear the lesson for the thundering of rain on the tin roof – if there is a roof. Books? What books? Writing materials? Few authorities provide them.

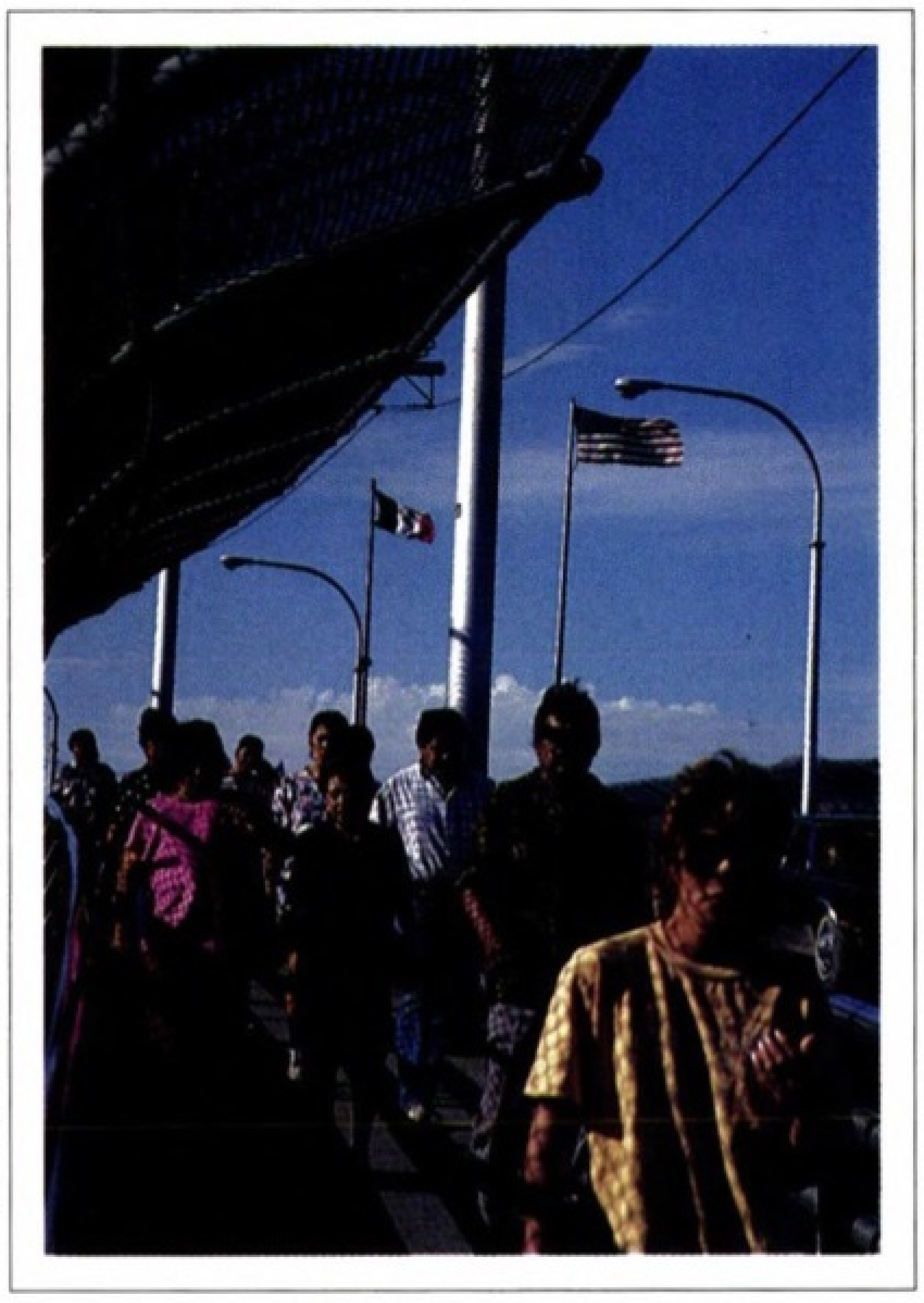
I find it amazing therefore that a recent, unpublished nation-wide survey of Nigerian women conducted by the United Nations Children's Fund finds that 98 per cent, whether from north or south, town or country, Christian or Muslim, literate or illiterate (and 70 per cent are illiterate), still want their children to go to school. Not only that, but most want their daughters as well as their sons to go on to tertiary education. There are communal differences. Only 45 per cent of Muslim women in the North want university-educated daughters, compared to 73 per cent of pagan women and 72 per cent of Christian women.

I came away from reading the report wondering whether the researchers – all Nigerians – had strayed into a Nigeria hitherto hidden from government planners and other aid agencies. All the high-profile educational programmes are about educating 'ignorant' women through vocational training and literacy classes. But here are Nigerian women saying 'What we want is education for our children'. I knew this had to be the authentic voice of the married woman because the researchers also found out that 96 per cent of women had no concept of leisure time, and 84 per cent would like to attend literacy classes but three-quarters wouldn't be able to find the time.

Sounds a bit like me trying to find time for some self-improvement scheme – and I've only got three children. Most Nigerian women have six. But they know what they want for their children. They would prioritize education. Unfortunately, it seems that the Government is unlikely to listen to them. ■

Elizabeth Obadina is a freelance writer and journalist living in Lagos.

Mexico through the Tortilla Curtain



DAVID RANSOM

*There are plenty of good reasons why Mexico matters but it can be difficult to see what they are. Before setting out on a journey through the country **David Ransom** wonders why the myopia persists.*

NOWHERE else in the world does the South meet the North directly across a land border – and not just anywhere in the North, but the American metropolis itself. Today, along that 3,000-kilometre line in the sand, a 'Tortilla Curtain' made from razor wire and bits of landing strip left over from the Gulf War is descending over the lives and the minds of the people who live on either side of it.

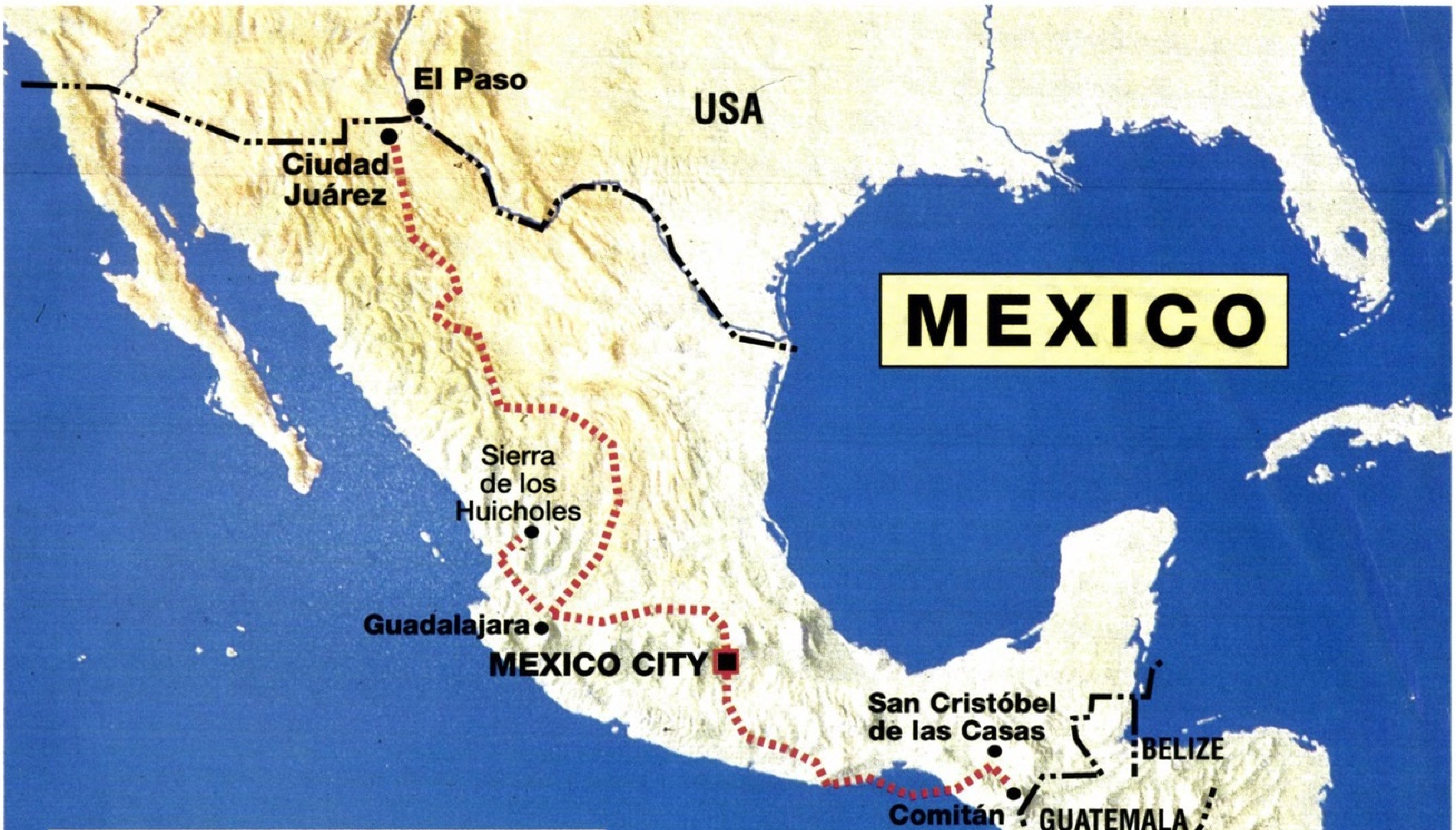
When walls like this start going up it's a sure sign that something deeply wrong is going down. The 'Tortilla Curtain' has come to represent the deepening division between North and South. This has replaced the conflict between East and West as the most urgent and potentially dangerous challenge facing the world. Mexico is where you have to come to discover what lies behind it.

But Mexico is not just symbolic of wider issues. The country has an absorbing history of its own that is not confined to the mysteries of its pre-Columbian past.

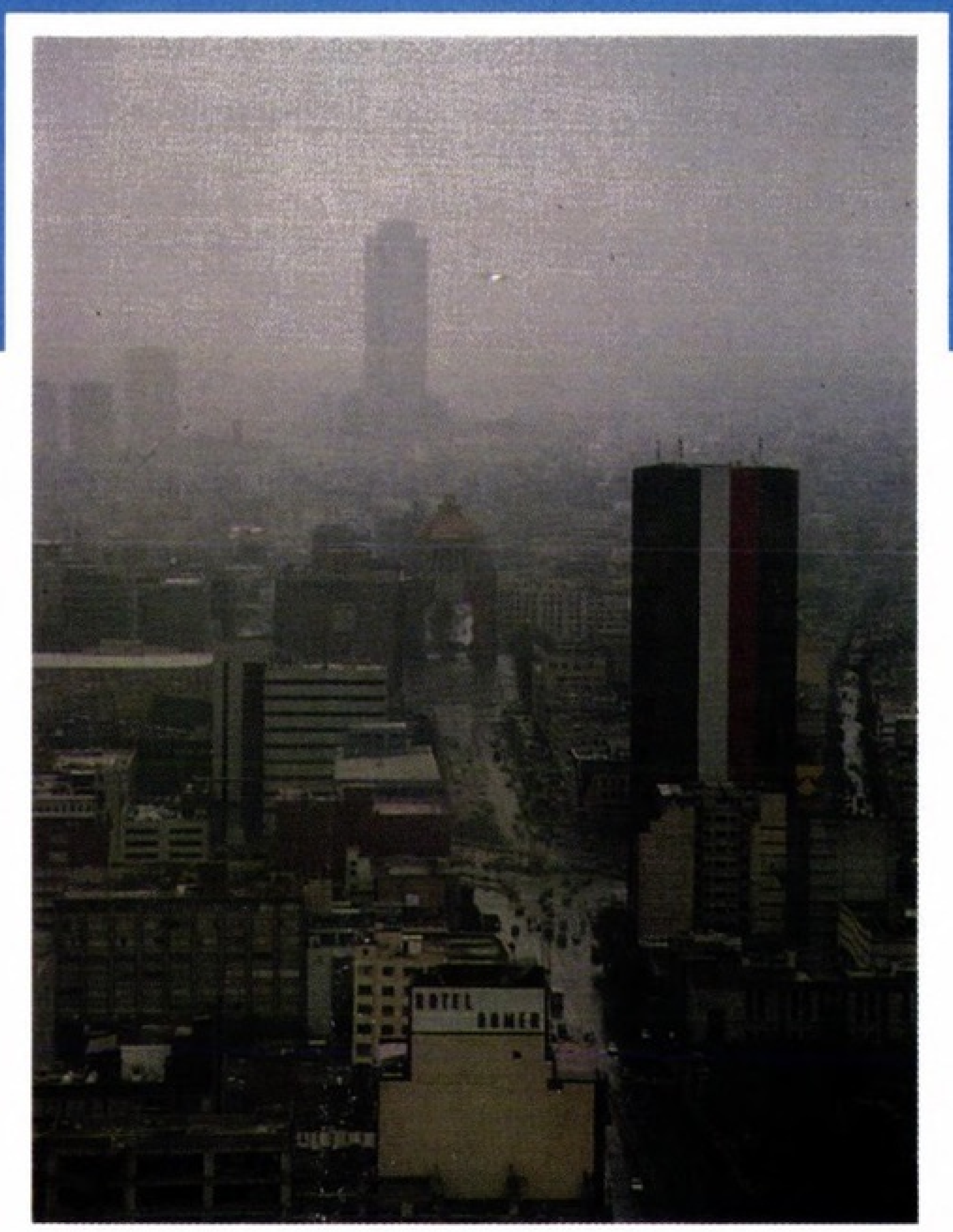
While Europe and North America had their eyes on the First World War and the Russian Revolution in 1917, Mexico was nearing the end of a bloody revolution that was no less profound and arguably left a more fruitful legacy. An Institutional Revolutionary Party (the PRI) slowly emerged from the bloodshed and took power in 1928. It has held on ever since, longer than any other political party in the world. In Mexico grandparents have been able to live out their three score years and ten if not in blissful tranquillity then free from the fear of mass violence or the urgent desire to use it.

But a perverse indifference to the country persists, and to be honest I am at a loss to know quite why this should be so. Perhaps the modern news agenda doesn't yet know how to deal with the absence of war. Or maybe it has something to do with tourism. Millions of tourists visit Mexico every year only to be blinded by the great beauty of the place, by the cosmetics of tourist attraction. They leave knowing very little but quite satisfied that they have discovered enough.

Another possibility is a good deal less palatable. A large majority of the Mexican



OXFORD CARTOGRAPHERS



XIMENA RANSOM

From border to border: the journey through Mexico (above). Bridging the US/Mexico border (far left) and Mexico City shrouded in pollution (left).

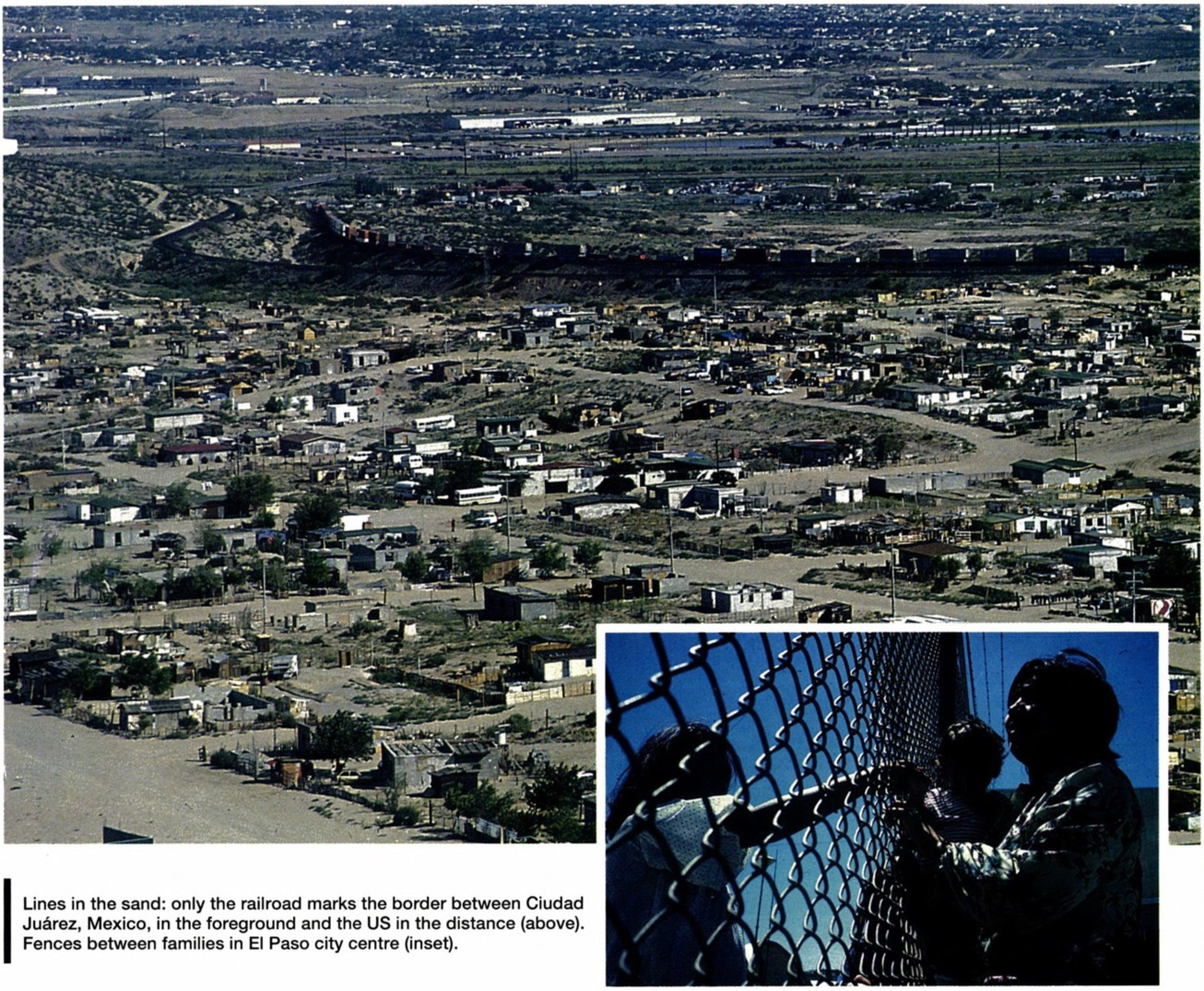
population is *mestizo,* a mixture of indigenous and Spanish ancestry. This makes them a particularly intriguing people. But racists of all kinds reserve a special contempt for them, needing to believe that nothing of any real interest could possibly come from such a mixture and preferring to remain in ignorance of any evidence to the contrary.

Mexico doesn't fit into standard perceptions of the Third World either. If you divide up the country's national wealth equally among all Mexicans you find that they are much richer than most other people in the South. But of course Mexico's wealth is *not* divided up equally. Even the most conservative official estimate shows a third of the population, perhaps 30 million people, living beneath a very meagre poverty line indeed. Mexico's 35 richest families, on the other hand, have as much wealth between them as its 15 million poorest citizens.

Most Mexicans now seem to agree that the legacy of the Revolution – if not what lay behind it – has finally been exhausted. Corruption, authoritarianism, massive debts, the IMF and the World Bank have between them undermined the kind of regime that staged power cuts in polling booths and kept multinationals like Shell and Esso out of roadside gas stations. What remains, however, is a slightly jaded but nonetheless deep conviction that democracy, 'the will of the people', matters.

So where now and what next? The PRI itself appears to have few doubts. It outspent every other lobbyist in Washington in pursuit of congressional approval for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with Canada and the US. The Agreement should, the PRI believes, resolve the ambiguities of Mexican history by bestowing upon the country permanent membership of the North.

This summer there are presidential elections which might have some bearing on the outcome. But it's doubtful. What matters is not so much the ritual contest of rhetoric, money and power in six-yearly presidential elections, but how Mexicans think and feel day by day about the society they live in or want to create. The journey that follows aims to give you a sense of what these sentiments are. ■



Lines in the sand: only the railroad marks the border between Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, in the foreground and the US in the distance (above). Fences between families in El Paso city centre (inset).

DAVID RANSOM

ALEX WEBB / MAGNUM

Border blues

__David Ransom__ crosses the Rio Grande between El Paso and Ciudad Juárez – a border where the barriers to people are going up as the barriers to trade come down.

PASSPORT. Toothbrush. Currency. I fumble through my pockets, rehearsing the familiar border checklist. I feel surreptitious, as if my next step might trigger the wrath of border guards lurking everywhere on this, one of the most heavily fortified frontiers in the world.

My heart pounds as I walk like a circus animal through a tunnel of chain-link fencing to the middle of the bridge over the Rio Grande. A small polished obelisk marks the spot where the US and Mexico, North and South, meet. Sitting with her back against the obelisk is a barefoot young mother, a child in her lap. I cannot tell if she is begging or not.

Beneath us, on the river, people paddle rafts through the poisoned water, a moat between banks lined with concrete. A disused railway bridge is painted black and has a steel barrier set across it. A boy sits astride the barrier, gazing into the surveillance systems of El Paso. Razor wire, fences, walls, obstacles of all kinds litter a barren track of land that runs like a military trench along the frontier. This is the 'Tortilla Curtain'. It is still being built. One day it may even be visible from space, as they say you can see the Great Wall of China.

I walk on down into Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. I imagine that crossing this frontier will be like breaking into a bank. But no-one has checked me out of the US and no-one seems interested in checking me in to Mexico. I go in search of someone who wants to have a look at my passport. I can find no-one, not even the bemused old man in an official-looking kiosk who turns out to be selling lottery tickets.

Just a couple of miles north from the city centre, where the Rio Grande heads off across New Mexico and leaves behind its duties as the borderline, you can walk from Mexico into the United States without knowing that you've done so. Mexicans go shopping in the mall on the outskirts of El Paso.

For these two cities, El Paso and Ciudad Juárez, have grown up through history as one, in some kind of delicate equilibrium between the urge to divide and the desire to unite.

'I don't think it will *ever* be possible to make a clear division between this country and Mexico,' says Delia Gomez of the Las Americas Asylum Project in El Paso. 'People go back and forth and it's very, very difficult to measure who's actually living here and who is not... It's not too hard to get across the river, but then you can't get beyond the various checkpoints and helicopters and all kinds of things.'

El Paso/Ciudad Juárez is in the middle of a gigantic and beautiful desert. You have to cross hundreds of kilometres of it to reach anywhere else in any direction. Here, on the roads that lead to Los Angeles, Albuquerque or San Antonio, the border police lie in wait.

I make off for my first taste of Ciudad Juárez.

There's no denying it – the place is different. From the soiled architecture, the hum of air conditioning and the sombre, depopulated streets of a provincial Texas town you hit the bewildering bustle of an exploding Latin American city. Everything disintegrates in a racket of human voices and clapped-out combustion engines. This is the Latin America I know and love.

Anapra, the newest *colonia* on the outskirts of the city, is laid out in a precise grid across the bare desert. In two years it has grown from nothing to some 5,000 people. Houses begin with wooden pallets and roofing felt and grow through cement blocks into brick. The sterility of the desert keeps people reasonably healthy – despite the fact that their drinking water comes from steel barrels which originally contained toxic substances.

Travel along the mountainside above Ciudad Juárez and eventually you reach the city rubbish dump. Here, in a cloud of reeking dust, one of Mexico's multitudinous co-operatives controls an extremely efficient operation scavenging for scrap. A herd of goats gets in first to deal with the vegetable matter; then, in orderly succession, the dealers in cardboard, metal, plastics. By the end of the operation there's hardly anything left.

'These people are wonderful, just wonderful people,' says Frank, a Mexican-American former mailworker with a pragmatic evangelical mission. 'They will all go to heaven.' I say this is as near as I can conceive to hell on earth. He's indignant. 'You're wrong,' he says. 'Heaven is here.'

Looking out over El Paso he admits to drawbacks. 'Nobody should have to live like this when they're within spitting distance of the richest country on earth,' he says. At the day centre and health clinic he runs for women and children he poses for a photograph in front of the water tanker that doubles as a fire engine. Flash fires periodically engulf the shacks and anyone inside them. The place is a tinderbox.

And it is, I have to add, as degrading a spectacle of utter material destitution as I have ever seen anywhere in Latin America. Frank hurries off to a tiny shed where a mother lies mortally ill after childbirth.

Turn to the south and you see, sprawling into the desert beneath a burning sun, lakes of gleaming metal. These are the 'industrial parks' of the *maquiladoras*, the duty-free factories that assemble components from the US and export them back as finished products: hi-tech, state-of-the-art 'plant' knocking together anything from car engines to jacuzzis and packets of potato chips.

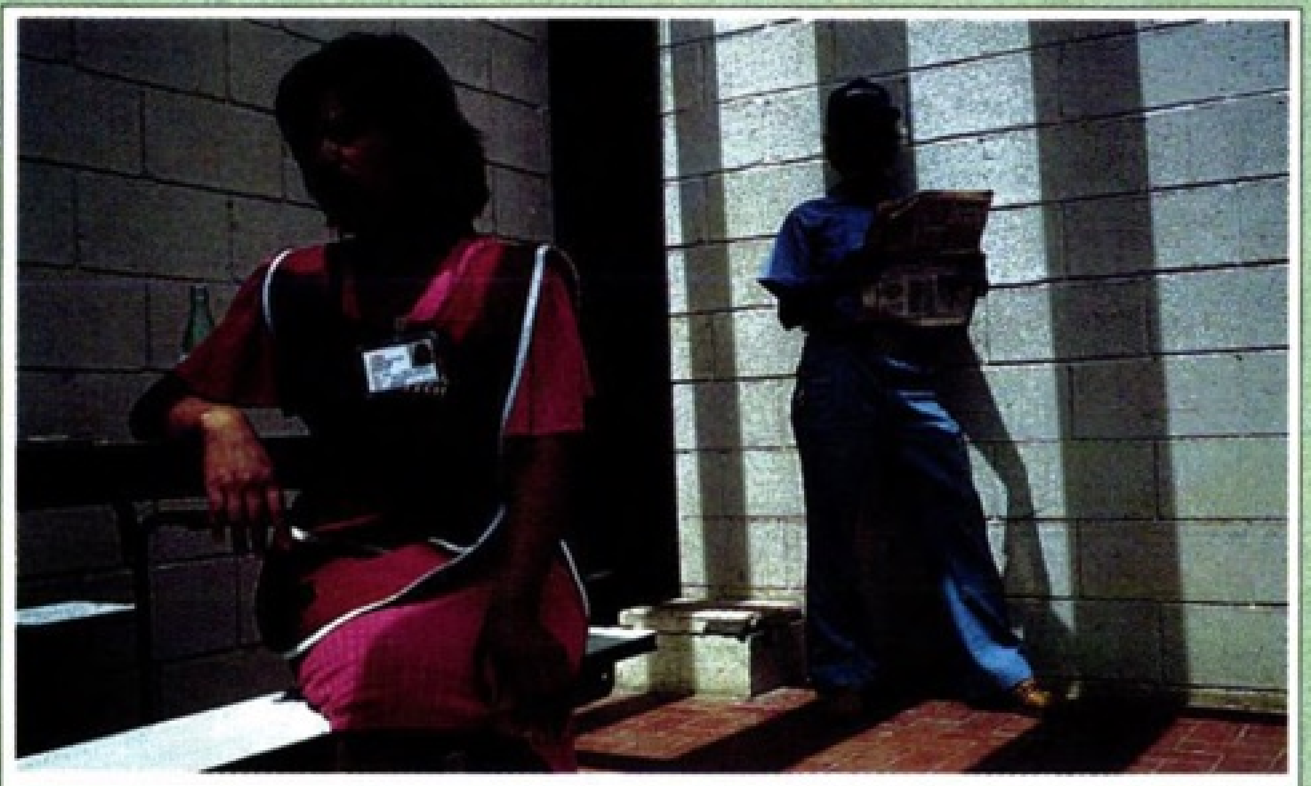
Now, some people argue – and I have sometimes been one of them – that such places represent the best hope there is for the future of the South. Mexico's growing population needs a million new jobs every year. Manufactured exports, once the exclusive preserve of the North, do not suffer from the same disastrous price fluctuations as copper or sugar, the primary-commodity ghetto into which the South is usually locked. 'Globalization' spreads industrial manufacturing for world markets into places like Malaysia and Mexico and,

Maquila sunrise

Industrial manufacturing for export only has been booming in Mexico and making waves in the US.

MAQUILADORA or *maquila* plants are 'offshore' activities permitted to import raw materials or parts without restriction for processing in Mexico and export to the US.

Such plants appeared first in the early 1960s in the East and South-East Asian 'tiger' economies, and most of the companies involved were foreign-owned, principally in the US. A government-sponsored initiative began in Mexico in 1965 and concentrated on the border area with the US.



Bare essentials : no contact or conversation in the *maquilas*.

ALEX WEBB / MAGNUM

Rapid expansion of the *maquiladora* programme began in 1982 with the Mexican debt crisis, the devaluation of the peso and a sharp fall in real wage levels. Employment in such plants increased from 123,000 in 1982 to almost half a million in 1991, and could reach three million by the end of the century. By the end of the 1980s the *maquiladora* sector was producing about one-quarter of the country's manufactured exports. Imports to the US from this sector in Mexico totalled $7.25 billion in 1991.

Since the 1970s the original 'sweat shop' small-scale operations employing almost exclusively women have grown in size and the proportion of women workers has fallen to about one-half. There is greater emphasis on technically sophisticated output by major multinational corporations, and 'zero error' delivery systems. Much of the trade is intra-firm, or between plants belonging to the same multinational company. Plants are also being sited away from the border, like Nissan's huge motor plant in Aguascalientes.

The largest single employer is now the transportation (mostly automobile) sector, with over 110,000 employees, followed by electronics with over 100,000 and textiles with about 45,000. There are some 2,000 plants in total.

In the mid-1980s the AFL-CIO union in the US estimated that the US had transferred directly 300,000, and indirectly one million jobs to Mexico. The Mexican Government for its part claimed that 5,000 suppliers in 44 US states shipped raw materials to Mexico. A more recent and precise survey finds that some 100,000 people in 250 work sites in the US saw their jobs shipped to Mexico during the past decade.

With NAFTA, GATT and the reduction of tariffs the 'comparative advantage' of manufacturing in Mexico will be restricted more specifically to low labour costs. The tariff advantages of *maquiladora* manufacturing will disappear.

Sources: Nigel Harris, 'Mexican trade and Mexico-US economic relations' jin Neil Harvey (ed) **Mexico, Dilemmas of Transition**, The Institute of Latin American Studies, London 1993; Harry Browne and Beth Simms, **Runaway America**, Resource Center Press, Albuquerque, 1993; **Twin Plant News**, September 1991.

DAVID RANSOM

Frank's heaven on earth: women and children from the rubbish dump in Ciudad Juárez gather in the playground outside the day centre.

like the move to free trade that goes with it, is good for the South.

At first glance I'm encouraged. The lines of sleek hangars do resemble a credible if not very appealing vision of an industrial future. Nearly 200,000 people have jobs in them. Here are the logos of all the megastars of North American and European multinational manufacturing: General Motors, RCA, Siemens, Philips, Thomsons...

Entering one of them is rather like booking into an American motel: a smart reception area, muzak, thick carpets, the best communications technology, hushed voices, extreme efficiency and a reverential air.

You are labelled and relieved of potentially hazardous objects like cameras and tape recorders. You march past photographs of the management team. You read strict instructions to behave sensibly, follow the yellow-lined path and act with the greatest ergonomic speed.

You enter a spotless cavern housing two writhing conveyor belts, queen insects tended by straight lines of rigid women in coloured bibs, perhaps a hundred seated down either side of each monstrous beast – fed with components at one end and churning out square cardboard egg-boxes at the other.

In the appalling racket you are watching an enterprise: one television set made every minute, one minute for each woman to perform six tasks for nine hours a day, five days a week, with a break of 20 minutes (paid) and another 20 minutes (unpaid) per day.

You have to admit to a sense of awe at the purposefulness of it all. You share a chuckle with the woman whose task it is, as each completed television leaves the production line and heads for the roof, to hit it with a rubber mallet.

But then you become increasingly upset. You go to the 'training room' where there's a replica of the conveyor belt, the blue plastic boxes of components, and you ask how long it takes to train someone for the job. 'Two days,' you are told. This is crude assembly work – work that almost anyone can do and no-one with any real choice in the matter really wants.

The hangar is stripped to bare essentials: the workers have just one room of lockers, open to the factory floor. No-one lingers here. There is no contact, no conversation. A canteen serves meals during the break but few people use it – two died of poisoning after eating in the RCA canteen down the road.

Here, by subterfuge, we manage to talk to some of the women before their shift: mere children, they seem, in their bibs. Some of them are. Somehow they all seem to be on the verge of tears as they talk. Yes, they like their jobs, they are good jobs. No, they don't have time for study: 'I sleep and I work. I can do nothing else.'

For this they are paid $30 a week and they live in places like Anapra, where the cost of living is actually higher than in El Paso. For this they must sign the Company Policy which says, without the slightest hint of irony at the Orwellian reference: 'For some of us our Mother Company is very much like a Leader or a Big Brother watching over us; many fail to appreciate just how big and diverse it is.'

Think of the cosiest multinational company you know of in a friendly progressive European country and this is probably it. But it could be another. This is how all televisions are made. And this is what the *maquiladora* business is all about. Flick through *Twin Plant News* and you find advertisements like this: 'COME TO MEXICO. More than 1,500 firms manufacture in Mexico under the *maquiladora* program and are saving up to $25,000 per direct-labor employee per year!'

Big business it is for Ciudad Juárez and for the border region of Mexico generally. Very large sums of money are made by city bosses who own the land where the plants are built, by the 'fixers' and agents who can get things done fast and know whose palms to grease, and by the banks and other dealers who switch money back and forth across the border.

But for the people who work in them – young, sometimes younger than Mexican law permits – it is different. Their young lives are scarred: materially, emotionally, physically and permanently.

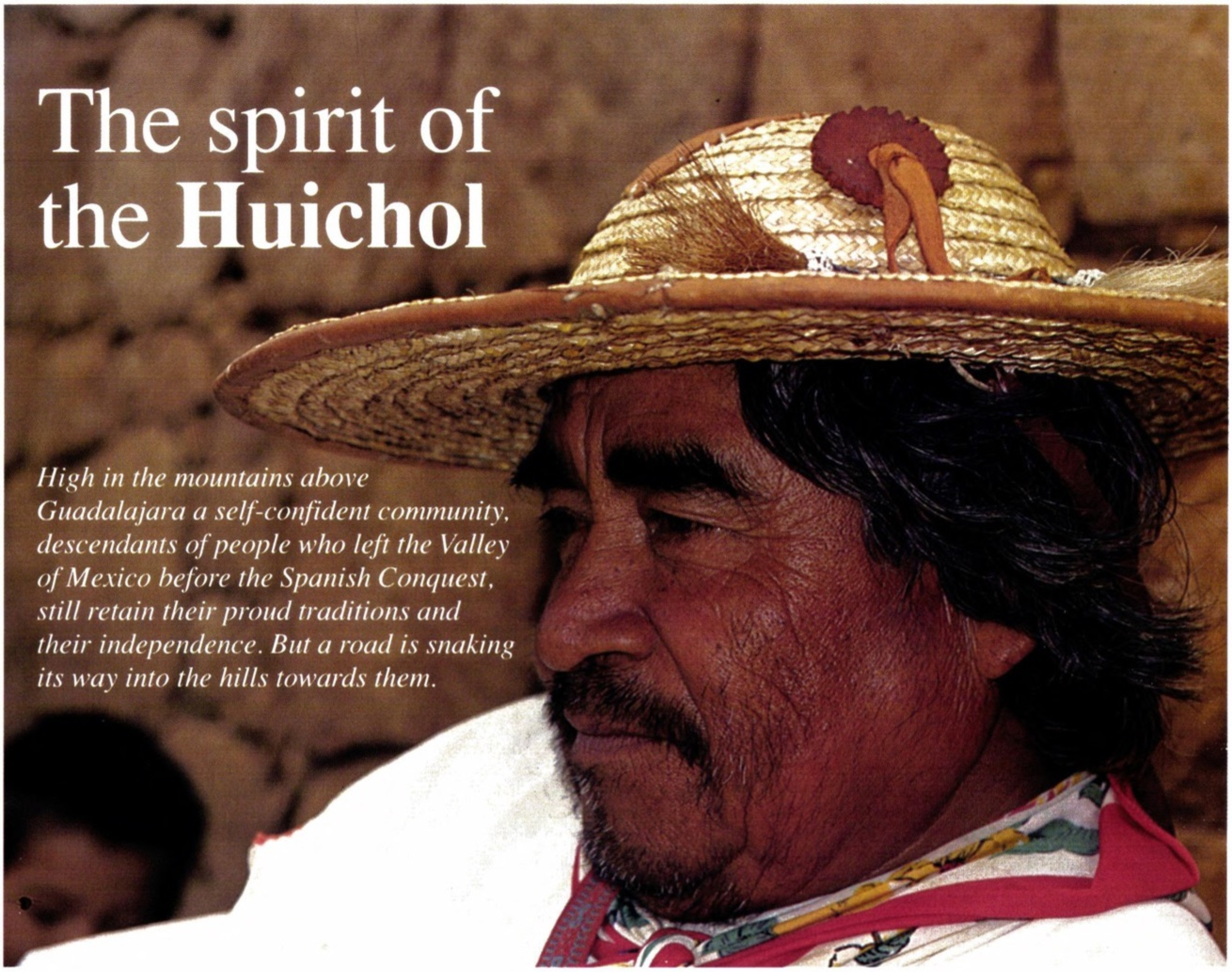
This is crude and scandalous exploitation. No amount of globaloney can obscure it. If unions and human-rights organizations and health-care agencies and educational institutions cannot reach these people – and so far they seem to have been unable to do so – then at least the household-name multinational megastars who hide their concentration camps behind the chain-link fences of Ciudad Juárez should be called to account.

Late one night I cross back into El Paso from Ciudad Juárez. To one side is a special fast-track crossing-point for trucks from the *maquiladoras*. Television sets, jacuzzis, car engines and potato chips zip effortlessly into the US. But there's a battery of armed guards waiting for the people, and a huge foyer filled with petitioners who seem to have been there always, gazing at a hole in a glass wall into which from time to time they feed packets of documents like sacrificial offerings to the border gods. A big Texan in a stylish uniform thumbs through my passport. He is not satisfied. Then he finds a small green card and says 'That is what I was looking for. Welcome to the United States.'

The streets of El Paso are empty and silent. Groups of 'illegals' huddle together on street corners, chatting and laughing, an occasional glance thrown over a shoulder to check for the patrol vans that elsewhere might be looking for stray dogs. I ask myself who has been caged by the Tortilla Curtain and the answer is, of course, El Paso – caged, that is, by fear and loathing of a people upon whom they depend for the very life of their own city, a place that no-one without a Mexican connection ever cares to visit. Mexicans, meanwhile, respond to the Tortilla Curtain with the sane human instinct to demolish or bypass it. You might say they are eating it. ■

The spirit of the **Huichol**

High in the mountains above Guadalajara a self-confident community, descendants of people who left the Valley of Mexico before the Spanish Conquest, still retain their proud traditions and their independence. But a road is snaking its way into the hills towards them.



DAVID RANSOM

The shaman Don Ricardo keeps his secrets to himself.

INDIANA JONES in jeans walks up the sloping floor to the cockpit of the 1943 DC3 aircraft. He stuffs a plastic bag into a hole in the fuselage and cranks up the engines. Around me in the cabin sit a dozen Huichol people, some wearing hats that resemble straw boaters decorated with a circle of feathers and coloured ribbons. But their knuckles are white, like mine. My companion, Dagoberto, is a veteran pilot from the Mexican Air Force via the Amazon. We were supposed to be flying in his plane, but it crashed.

I can look through the cockpit and see the mountain coming, waving about in front of us. Just as we are about to strike, a small path comes into view, running up the mountainside between the trees. We clatter into what looks like someone's back garden. I make to get off. Dagoberto restrains me. We have three more stops like this to make. The plane turns round and falls down the mountain into the air over a precipice. Indiana Jones seems to enjoy the sensation; I am writing my own obituary.

This is the mountain fastness of the Huichol peoples, some 20,000 of them. They are one of the most important groups among Mexico's 10 million indigenous peoples, and it's impossible not to conclude that they are so because to reach them from the outside you must be propelled by a death-wish. Tourists are banned.

The Sierra de los Huicholes, part of the western Sierra Madre range north-west of Guadalajara, must once have been a high plateau. Now it is scored by deep, terraced ravines blanketed with a sparse, fragile covering of mountain oaks, subtropical vegetation and bright patches of cultivated maize.

A reception awaits the plane at San Miguel Huaistita. The men wear white tunics elaborately embroidered in day-glo red, orange, green. There are warm greetings for Carlos, the school teacher, who's arriving to start a new term. We help him carry his books and papers up the hillside to his house, where he invites us to stay.

The Huichol language remains in common use, so complex that few outsiders have ever been able to speak it. Their culture, deeply devotional to an elaborate matrix of gods, spirits and ancestral presences in everyday life, is expressed with great refinement in weaving, embroidery and intricate representations of the universe achieved by fixing coloured threads to boards with beeswax.

Politically independent and democratic, with all land held in common, the Huichol administer their 'communities' through elected officials: governors, second governors, magistrates, police officers. Outsiders are allowed to remain only on sufferance:

the Franciscan school, for many years the only source of education in the community, lies vacant since the teachers were asked to leave and replaced by a secular state-run school.

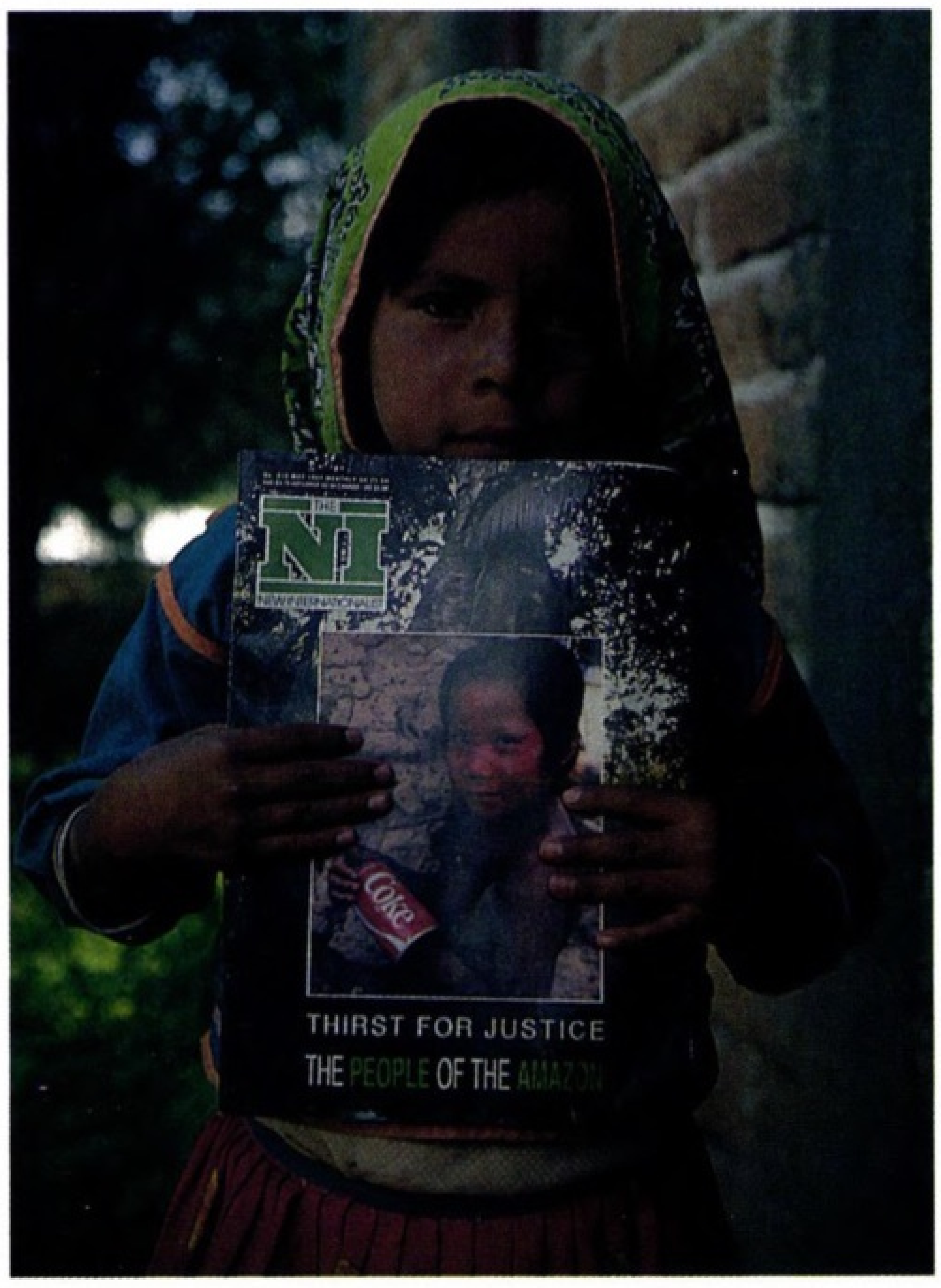
Geraldo, the Second Governor of San Miguel, explains the strict and by no means tender administration of justice. The severest punishment is to be sent to the stocks in neighbouring San Andrés. It is said (though hard to verify) that the death penalty was once enforced by leading the condemned person, blindfold, to a precipice.

But at the heart of the community is the shaman, or *maraakame*. Don Ricardo is the *maraakame* of San Miguel and, coming across him near his house, we arrange to talk to him later that day. When we return he is not there.

In the meantime we visit the village – less a centre of population than a meeting place. Most of the community have small farms or *ranchos* outside the village. From here they descend to work their fields in the valleys.

The village square has a large tree from which hangs the hide of a cow, a slowly decaying memorial to its slaughter for the most recent *fiesta*. A swing is tied to the branches of the tree, and children play beneath it. There is a health centre to one side, and in one corner a small window around which a dozen or so men are gathered. Out of this window a hand passes a succession of Modelo beer cans. Empty ones litter the ground. The men are extremely drunk and, despite my attempts to evade them, a young man staggers up to me.

The *People of the Amazon* meet the people of the Sierra Madre: Gerania and the NI.



DAVID RANSOM

'Are you pastor?' asks Cirilo in English.

'No, reporter,' I reply.

'You *are* pastor,' he insists.

'No...'

And so it continues until I realize these are the only words of English that Cirilo knows. A crazed man on horseback gallops up. He has, he says, come from somewhere and doesn't know where he is. He just got on his nag and off it went. Could I spare him five pesos?

" We are not living in a museum here. We welcome change. Our culture, our traditions are strong and alive because they adapt, they change."

We look for Don Ricardo again. He is sitting on the slope outside his house, throwing pebbles at a chicken. We greet him and prepare to talk. But slowly he subsides to the ground. He too, it seems, is not averse to the odd Modelo.

So we return to Carlos' house. I talk to Gerania, his niece. She is six and very bright indeed. She is gluing together a 'book' out of political leaflets. She's about to start school – not easy, because the children have to sleep in dormitories during the week, only returning home to their *ranchos* at weekends. Secondary school means leaving the community and going to Guadalajara, a costly exercise which most Huichol parents cannot afford.

She asks me what I'm doing. Trying to explain (less easy than you might imagine) I show her a copy of the **NI** I have with me, one I wrote two years ago about the Amazon. I suggest a photograph of her with the magazine, and she agrees.

The night is torn by a vivid thunderstorm. Dagoberto and I set out at dawn. The sun rises over cloud-filled valleys and I reflect that this, the place where they live, must be the origin of the equanimity the Huichol display. Who could ever wish to leave such a place?

We walk through the forest for half an hour along mountain paths to the village where Antonio lives. It is a collection of buildings on a promontory overlooking a valley. He is another 'big' person in the community, once a teacher, now the Director of the Regional Funds of Solidarity, a fund administered directly from the office of the President. We have breakfast; a fermented maize and chilli drink, dog meat and tortillas cooked over a wood fire in the kitchen building.

'No, very few people leave here,' Antonio assures me, holding his small son Alvaro on his lap. 'I went away to Guadalajara to school. But I came back. So do most of us.

'We are not without our difficulties. Loggers want our trees. Just recently we tore up a contract signed by one of our communities without our knowledge and we kicked the logging company out. But we're not against careful commercial logging which we control. We must plan reforestation, develop our resources. There is a big problem with soil erosion. We also want a road. One has reached San Andrés, and we've agreed to use our Regional Funds to extend it here.'

My heart sinks. But Antonio has few doubts. 'Look, we are not living in a museum here. We welcome change. Our culture, our traditions, are strong and alive because they adapt, they change. Of course there will be problems. But we think the advantages will be greater.'

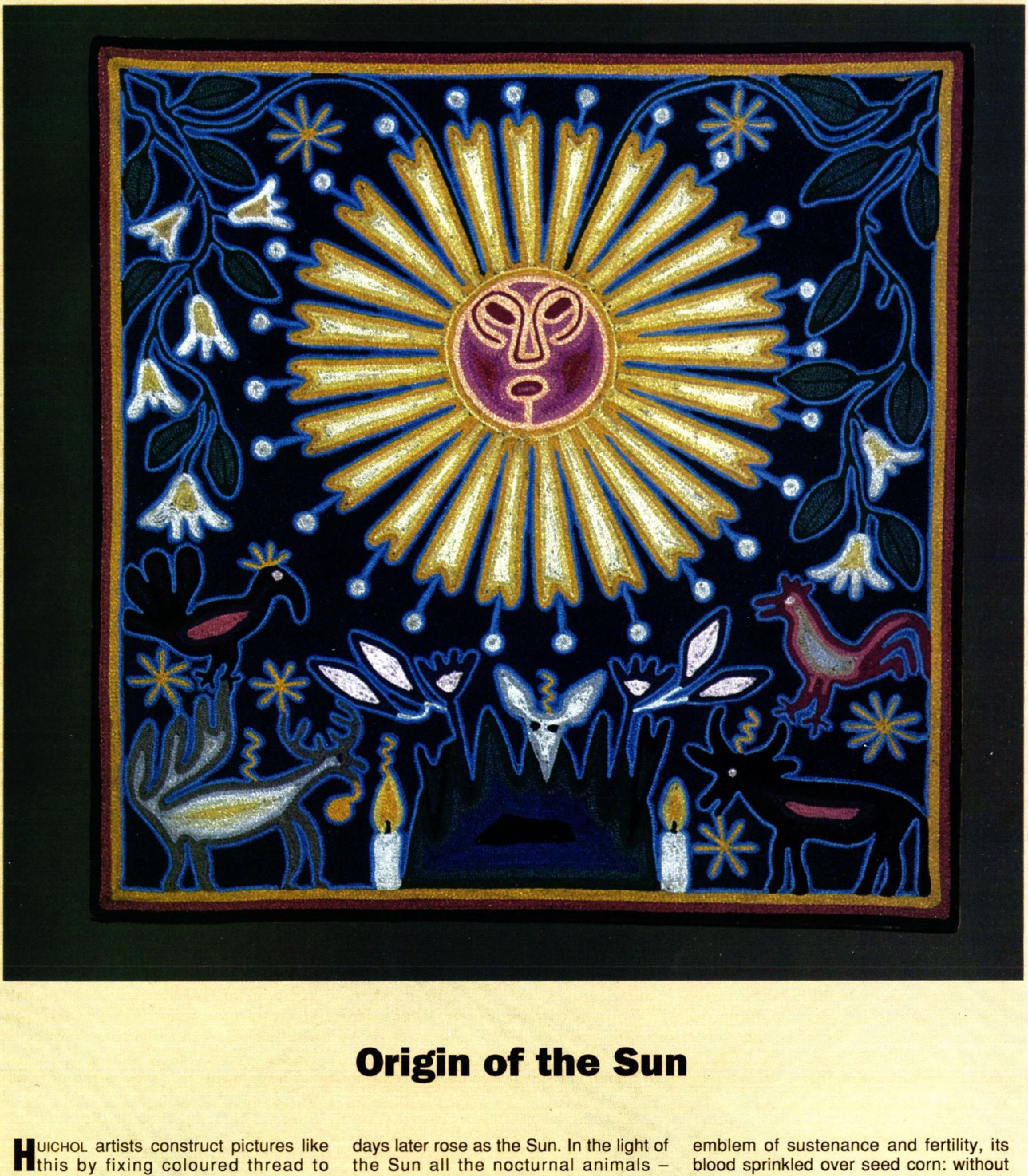
He mentions that from time to time military patrols call at his house. He does not say so, but I imagine that they are in search of 'drugs'. The crooked shadow of this benighted issue falls over even the remotest corners of the country.

I know that there is also a health problem here. Not long ago seven small children died of diarrhoea and dehydration. The health clinic in San Miguel is now well stocked, but there is a suggestion that Huichol parents prefer to use the *maraakame*, who dissuades them from going to the clinic. Whether the children died for this reason I do not know. Although I am told that a virulent strain of malaria is among the Huichol, it is never mentioned to me in San Miguel.

Dagoberto has an errand to fulfil in Popotita and San Luisito, two smaller communities Antonio tells us are 'no more than an hour' away. This means something like two or three hours for Dagoberto and me, stumbling over stones, wandering blindly through mists that suddenly rise up from the valley, pausing for breath 'to admire the view' or to inspect religious sites. Perched in trees there are strange pots, while left in piles of stone and ashes are the 'eyes of god' – diamond shapes woven in coloured thread, through which the gods can see beneath the earth and make contact with ancestors. The whole landscape is enchanted by the spirit of the Huichol.

We tumble into Popotita. Because it has no airstrip it seems even more undisturbed. Dagoberto has taken up my interest in *maraakames* with some zeal, and we scour the place in search of one. The men, how-

(continued on page 12)



DAVID RANSOM

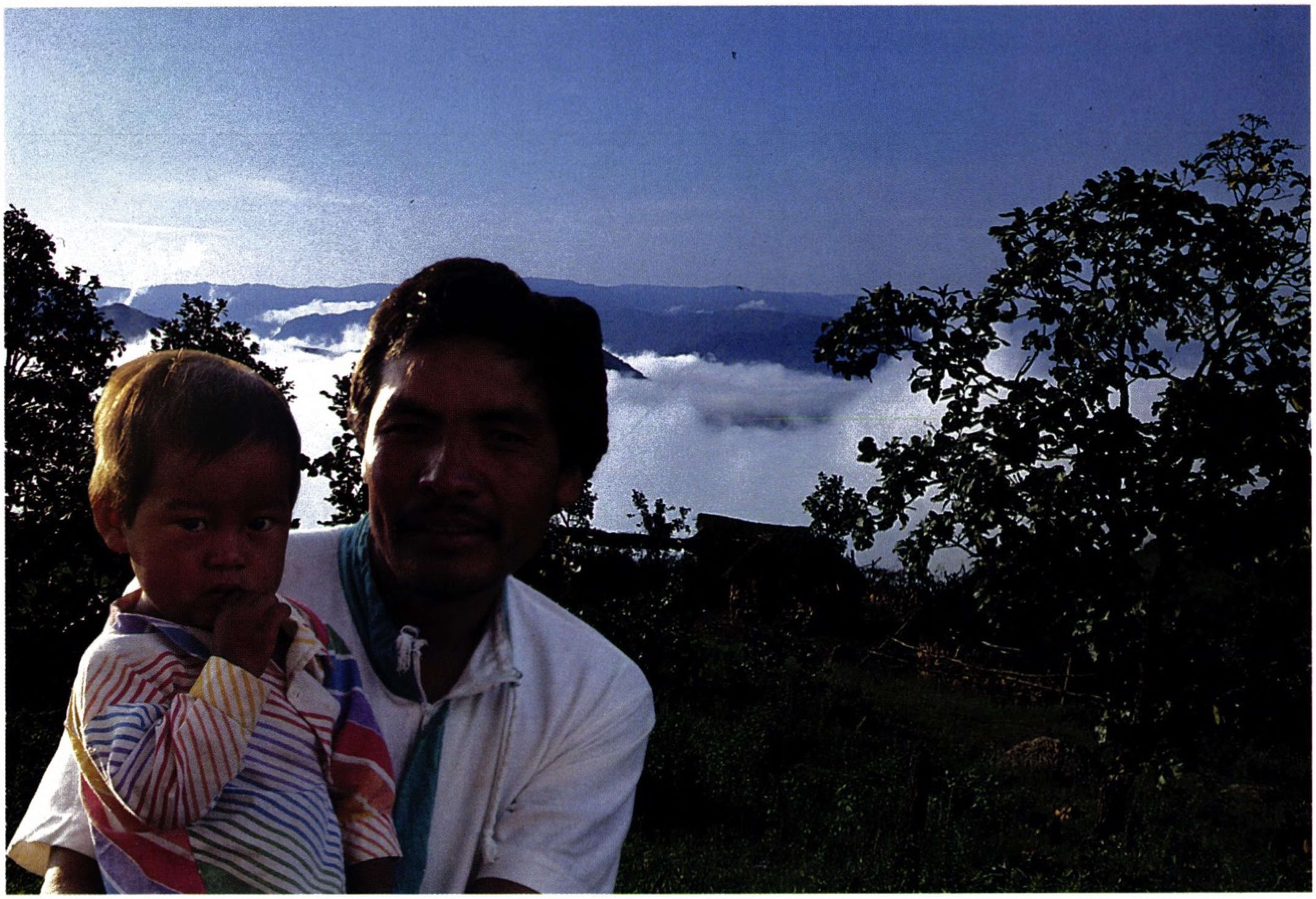
Origin of the Sun

HUICHOL artists construct pictures like this by fixing coloured thread to boards with beeswax. The themes of the pictures reflect complex belief-systems.

Like the Aztecs, the Huichol believe that they themselves made the Sun. In the beginning only the light of the Moon fell upon the earth and people were much inconvenienced. The Huichol came together to decide what to do. They asked the Moon to lend them her only son, a limp, one-eyed boy. At first she objected but finally she agreed. The Huichol gave the boy full ceremonial dress and then threw him into a furnace, where he was consumed. But he revived, ran under the earth and five days later rose as the Sun. In the light of the Sun all the nocturnal animals – jaguars, coyotes, grey foxes, snakes – became angry and shot arrows at him. The only animals to protect the Sun on his first journey across the sky were the grey squirrel and the giant woodpecker. The nocturnal animals – their eyes half-closed against the light – returned to their caves, water-pools and trees. The woodpecker now carries the colour of the Sun on its scarlet crest; the grey squirrel is referred to as 'father' by the Huichol – it knows more than other animals because it can find nuts and hide them again.

The deer portrayed in this picture has a very special significance. It is the emblem of sustenance and fertility, its blood sprinkled over seed corn: without the deer, rain and good crops, health and life cannot be obtained. According to Huichol myth corn was once a deer, perhaps because in ancient times deer were the main source of nourishment, as corn is now. Deer hunts were preceded by fasting, and followed by festivities. Finally a 'race for life' took place in which boys and girls raced into the forest to retrieve emblems left by the *maraakames*. However, due to a combination of over-hunting and environmental degradation the deer are now virtually extinct.

Source: Carl Lumholtz **Unknown Mexico** vol 2 (The Rio Grande Press Inc, Glorieta, New Mexico, 1902).



DAVID RANSOM

Antonio and his son Alvaro: who could ever wish to leave such a place?

ever, are all down in the valley working the fields. Only women and children inhabit the houses, and there are no female *maraakames*. Occasionally, from the *ranchos* below us on the hillsides, I hear laughter, clapping, singing.

We return to San Miguel. Dagoberto recruits Carlos to help with Don Ricardo, who is his uncle and now sits making a new hat. Carlos assures me that Don Ricardo is 'very well disposed' to answer my questions, so I plant my tape recorder in front of him and begin.

'Don Ricardo, I wonder if you could tell me something about the legends of the Huichol. For example, what about the legend of how the world was created?'

At this stage,I am ignorant of the fact that the Huichol creation legends, which the *maraakame* chants as he leads a pilgrimage in search of the hallucinogenic peyote plant, take a very long time to tell. As long as eight hours.

'Is there another question you would like to ask?' suggests Carlos.

'Perhaps Don Ricardo could tell me, what exactly *is* a *maraakame*?'

Silence.

'Well, how many *maraakames* are there?'

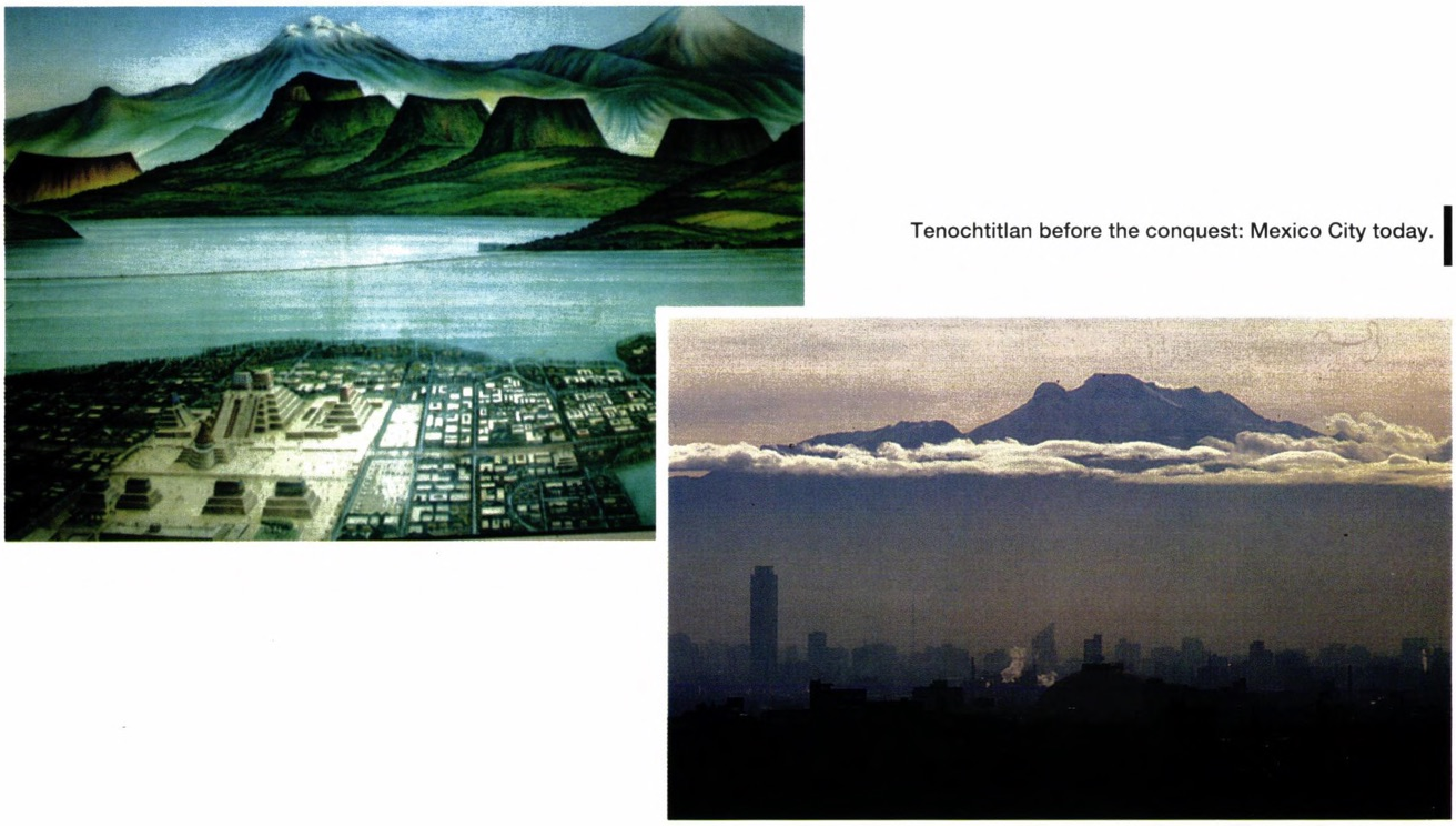
'We do not know,' replies Carlos. 'An infinite number. There are many yet to be discovered.'

And then he comes to my rescue. 'Listen, David, it's not that Don Ricardo does not want to answer your questions. But a question like "What is a *maraakame*?", how is he to answer such a question? A *maraakame* sings, he prays, he baptizes children and gives them their names. He is like a priest. He gives us understanding. He teaches, he carries with him our tradition, our culture. He celebrates *fiestas*. He is an important person in our family, you could say the most important. He guides the rest of us. When a child is ill we take her to him to be cured. He must baptize everyone in our community. If someone does not have a *maraakame*, sometimes they have to ask for another one somewhere else.'

Later, Carlos explains that Don Ricardo may have feared that I might steal the secrets of his office. For, after all, why should someone wish to know? Curiosity is insufficient. As they value it, so must the Huichol protect their culture.

They begin to ask questions of their own. Is there discrimination in England? Well, yes there is. There is discrimination here in Mexico too, says Carlos; against indigenous peoples and *by* indigenous peoples, who regard the Mexican population at large as 'mere *mestizos*'. Cirilo, his head now cleared of Modelo, talks about history, his love of it, his desire to learn more of it, his inability to pay for the learning.

We take the inaugural flight of a small Cessna aircraft back to Guadalajara. We fly for an hour over the land of the Huichol before the city spreads out beneath us, a colourless and uninspired version of a Huichol picture. The Huichol know that you inhabit a land, a community and a spirit, not the image of a world filled with false expectations that seem to rise up with the fumes from the city streets. ■



Tenochtitlan before the conquest: Mexico City today.

LENARS / MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY

JULIO ETCHART

Superbowl **city**

The game goes on in Mexico City, though no-one can bear to watch.

THERE'S a stadium of mountains and volcanoes around the world's largest city. It's a grand stage for what, on bad days and from the worst seats, resembles a playing field of asphalt, concrete and rust beneath an evil-smelling cloud of dust and gas. Periodically shaken by lethal earthquakes, the place floats on shifting waves of ground, subsiding slowly into the lake on which, like the great Aztec city it replaced, it was built. When you can see them the terraces of the stadium – green mountainsides in the distance – are empty, as if no-one can bear to behold the spectacle.

My job, however, is not just to watch the game but commentate on it as well, and I don't even know the rules. The best thing seems to be to start in the middle, and I head for the Zócalo, the huge central square. To get there I have to fight my way through throngs of people queuing outside bookshops to buy textbooks – it's the beginning of the school year and I'm unsure whether the queues result from a zeal for learning or a failure of supply. Probably both. Either way I'm not the only one looking for a book of rules.

Plumes of wood-smoke rise over tents of plastic sheeting. Underneath them squat hundreds, perhaps thousands of protesters, gathered around a large, limp Mexican flag. The Zócalo resembles Tiananmen Square before the tanks rolled in. People stand with collection boxes handing out leaflets.

There are dozens of groups, and some of them have been here for months: fisherfolk from Tabasco on the Gulf coast, where fish stocks have been decimated by pollution from the oil industry; *campesinos* who've marched from Veracruz claiming land; villagers from Guerrero who can't find the money to get connected to the electricity grid.

They come here to make their demands known, to 'reclaim' and 'require' things of the President of the Republic, who occasionally appears on the balcony of the National Palace to one side of the square, but does not actually live there.

Perhaps it's from fear of asphyxiation, of a sudden crushing by the sheer weight of human numbers, that people everywhere in the city make huddles of animated debate, talking tactics. Without a huddle of my own, but desperately in need of tactics, I ask Louise to come to my aid. She is a Canadian who has lived on the brink here for nearly 20 years and is reported to know everyone; to achieve this you must, I feel, have supernatural powers as well as a battered old Volkswagen Beetle. But she too can get lost. Sometimes we pass the shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe several times in different directions on our way from one place to the next.

'Our prisons are full of innocent people,' says Rosio Culebro of the independent Mexican Commission for the Defence and Promotion of Human Rights. 'Most arrests are made without a warrant and are illegal,' she adds. I want to know if the

Conquest continued

The abuse of human rights in Mexico is now under much closer scrutiny.

JULIO ETCHART

According to Sergio Aguallo, a leading human-rights activist and academic, 'there were more human-rights violations in Mexico than under the Brazilian dictatorship. In Brazil they had 127 documented "disappearances" between 1964 and 1985; in Mexico there were over 450.'

Cases of human-rights abuses are now well documented and reveal a disturbing picture.

Immediately following the 1988 presidential election political violence erupted. The Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) claims that since July 1988 it has suffered 1,537 acts of violent aggression and 136 of its members have been killed. That there is organized violence against the political opposition and independent trades unions in Mexico is not seriously in doubt.

In May 1990 members of Mexico's Federal Judicial Police assassinated Norma Corona, president of the independent human-rights commission in the state of Sinaloa. The following month Americas Watch described torture as 'endemic in Mexico' and denounced a 'policy of impunity' that allows torture, rape and murder by the country's police and armed forces to go unpunished. The National Network of Civil Human Rights Organizations in Mexico has launched a campaign against impunity, backed by the detailed documentation of such cases.

The Minnesota Lawyers International Human Rights Committee reported in August 1992 on the abuse of indigenous rights in the southern state of Chiapas. It found 'repression of the indigenous population of Chiapas to be state policy'. It cited arbitrary arrest and the detention of priests, peasants and hundreds of peaceful protesters to deter social and political activism, and 'the aggressive enforcement of an oppressive criminal code'.

The Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Centre for Human Rights in San Cristóbal, Chiapas, continues to document violations of indigenous land rights and the practice of torture, murder, mass and arbitrary arrests.

Sources: Interview with Sergio Aguallo; PRD Human Rights Commission, **The political violence in Mexico**, Mexico City 1992; Alicia Ely-Yamin, **Justice corrupted, justice denied**, World Policy Institute, New York, 1992; Minnesota Lawyers International Human Rights Committee, **Conquest continued**, Minnesota, 1992; Red Nacional de Organismos Civiles de Derechos Humanos, **La impunidad persistente**, Mexico City, April 1993; Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, Informe semestral, January-July 1993.

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basic rules of human rights apply here. Mexican law is, she says, fundamentally flawed by a presumption of guilt for those suspected of 'organized crime' – which could, of course, be virtually anyone.

Mexico has traditionally pursued a 'progressive' foreign policy, condemning the Chilean coup, supporting Cuba, mediating on Nicaragua and periodically accepting political refugees from elsewhere in Latin America. In exchange for Mexican support, there has been little close scrutiny of the country by the international institutions of human rights.

But a Mexican human-rights movement, prompted at first by dissident intellectuals and now by more than 200 groups throughout the country, has blossomed. The Government set up its own Human Rights Commission in response. This has made it easier to register violations. But it has also raised deeper questions. The Commission can only make recommendations, which are by no means always acted upon. So violations go unpunished. The National Law Against Torture, for example, has never been used, despite numerous documented cases of torture by police officers.

'In Mexico we live with a corporate system,' says Berta Lujan, a member of the National Co-ordinating Committee of the Autonomous Labour Federation (FAT). It's early morning and we're sitting in her office in the FAT headquarters. Around us another hectic day gathers pace with constant intrusions by colleagues and telephones. Poised, sharp, gentle, in control, Berta takes no notice.

Inspired originally by radical Catholic priests, the FAT has managed to survive and grow by performing a delicate formal dance with Mexican labour legislation, which outlaws 'unregistered' federations. On the wall are plaques commemorating FAT's support for strikes.

'Social organizations, unions, peasant groups, citizens' organizations from the *barrios*, were all co-opted by the PRI, the political party in power,' she says. 'For more than 40 years the workers' struggle in Mexico has been very controlled, very repressed. Some of us believe, however, that it must be democratized.'

The official Mexican Workers' Federation (CTM) regularly 'presents' the support of the 'labour movement' to a grateful government which in the early 1980s cut real wages in half and is now dismantling Mexican labour laws. The CTM's nonagenarian leader Fidel Velazquez 'appears' on TV from time to time to croak invisibly from behind a battery of microphones, and for all I can tell no longer exists at all.

We clatter past the Virgin of Guadalupe once more and reach a backstreet where there's a co-operative of furniture makers.

There are co-operatives everywhere in Mexico. They're as much a tradition as an ideal. The factory of the Sociedad Co-operativa Union de Muebles La Villa is dark and filled with ancient machinery, sawdust, the jointed limbs of dead trees and the smell of sap. Some six years ago the 47 members of this furniture-making factory went on strike because they had not been paid. The longer the strike went on the more the owner owed his staff in unpaid benefits. Eventually he owed them more than the business was worth. The workers were entitled by Mexican labour law to take it over, and they did.

How much difference has it made? 'Work is work,' they say. Times are hard. They feel themselves to be under threat. Canadian furniture-makers, who visited recently, can get wood at one-third the price and have smarter machines. So there's a brewing contest between the price of human sweat in Mexico City and the price of wood and technology in Canada. The rules for this particular game are, of course, laid down by NAFTA. Victory goes to the cheapest, with no exceptions and no appeal.

One evening I drive into Mexico City over the high mountains to the east. Shafts of evening sunlight, like searchlights in smoke, splay down onto the floor of the

HECTOR GUEVARA

Watching the show and taking a nap at the *barrio* meeting in Mexico City.

great valley. Small volcanoes resembling pre-Columbian pyramids sprout from the flat surface. This was the sight that greeted the Spanish conquerors five hundred years ago, filling them with awe and greed.

Today there hangs over the city a slab of purple night, thick thunderclouds and smog stirred into an opaque flashing fluid. A deluge falls upon the shacks of the *barrios* that reach into the distance on either side of the road. Streets turn to rivers, squares to lily-ponds of garbage. You drive without stopping (there are no 'official' crossroads or traffic lights here) for perhaps 15 minutes through such scenes before you reach a sign that says 'Welcome to Mexico City'. No-one knows exactly how many people live in these *barrios*: it could be anywhere between two and five million people.

After the terrible earthquake in 1985 the government machinery proved as fragile as the buildings. Citizens took matters into their own hands, giving birth to a sense of 'civil society' and a plethora of self-help and 'action' groups that transformed the political face of the city. For every situation there is now a citizens' organization.

In this case it is the Asamblea de Barrios – or rather *two* Asambleas de Barrios, following a leadership split. I arrive as arranged at a large open-air theatre beside the inner ring-road in the city centre. There is no-one there.

Then, slowly, they make their entrance. Stately grandmothers, wizened rural faces, children bright-eyed before the show, women chatting, joking, remonstrating. A sound system, microphones. A photographer, Héctor Guevara, has no cameras – pawned for his daily bread. I take a gamble and lend him mine.

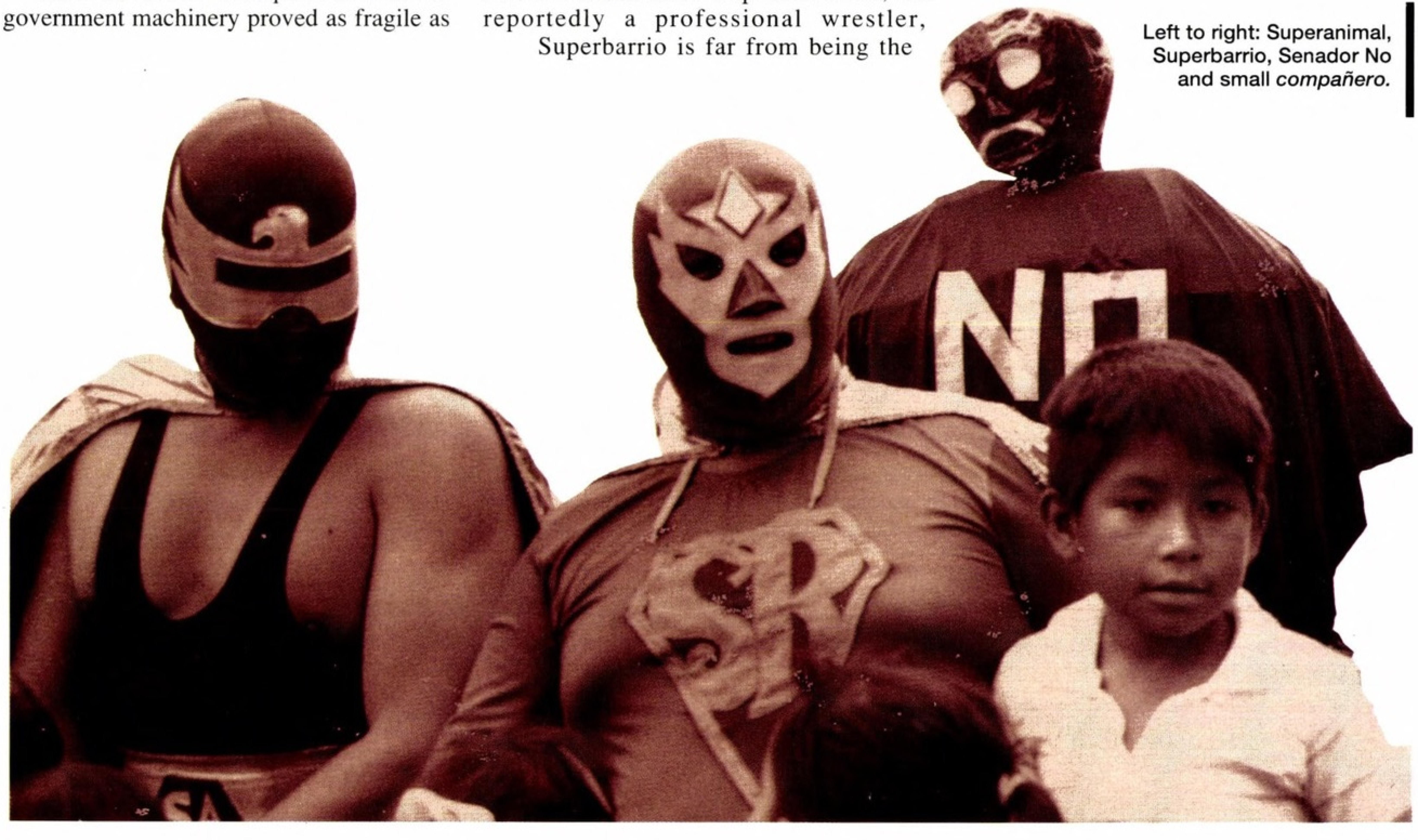
Eventually there are perhaps a thousand people crammed into every available space. Marcos Rascón, a busy figure, grabs the microphone and shouts. The *compañeros campesinos* and the fishing workers in the Zócalo, from Tabasco and Veracruz, step forward to say a few words. They are applauded. A *compañero* from the Workers' Party in Brazil apologizes for his halting Spanish and he is cheered. The *compañero reportero* from *New Internationalist* – I rise from my seat and wave a half-clenched fist – brings solidarity from England. Appreciative applause.

I wait for an appearance by Superbarrio. This media megastar has been around the *barrios* of Mexico City for a decade or so. Dressed in a modified Superman outfit, and reportedly a professional wrestler, Superbarrio is far from being the jester he was originally taken for. He really does turn up when called to points of conflict in the *barrios* and gets things sorted out. He's a mite portly around the midriff and his disguise also has the advantage, I imagine, that it can be donned by almost anyone with a similar physique.

His example has been followed by Superanimal, who has a keen interest in stray dogs, and by the mysterious Senador No, a candidate in a recent local election who wears a gas mask and is therefore assumed to have something to do with the environment. But none of them shows up.

No-one who values their sanity tries to make perfect sense of a place like Mexico City. No Superbowl, however wealthy or crazy, could possibly have invented it. It's out of control, for sure. But somehow it keeps working. The population has swelled threefold to perhaps 18 million in 30 years as if by some kind of centripetal force: if 18 million people think it's a good idea to live here then you have to come up with a pretty good reason to live somewhere else.

Perhaps many Mexicans do not have one, particularly in impoverished parts of the countryside. Perhaps it is sheer folly on the part of the Government to promote free-enterprise policies that appear to make the situation of such people worse. Perhaps environmental Armageddon, Moctezuma's true revenge, is the only conceivable outcome. But the game goes on, even if no-one knows the rules. You just have to play. ■



HECTOR GUEVARA

Left to right: Superanimal, Superbarrio, Senador No and small *compañero.*

PRI – RIP?

The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) has been written off many times before. But will Mexican voters really be the ones to decide in this summer's elections for the all-powerful presidency?

'I LIKE to tell my European friends,' says Roberta Lajous, 'that the Institutional Revolutionary Party is like two things. One is the Danish system.' I nod and search in my mind for anything at all I know about the Danish system. 'That is, the Party is inclusive,' she continues, 'a party of groups and alliances.' I nod knowingly. 'The other, because we represent continuity in Mexico, is the British Monarchy.'

I knock over my glass of mineral water. An institutional *revolutionary* party that resembles Good Queen Bess?

Roberta is a smart young woman in a sharp blue suit. Power rests easily on her shoulders. We are seated on a capacious leather sofa in her enormous office in the PRI headquarters in Mexico City. She is a member of the PRI's National Executive and responsible for international affairs. Her assistant is crouched on the floor mopping up my mineral water.

Has Roberta then kept in touch with the state of royal affairs in Britain?

'Oh yes,' she says. 'If I could move the whole of Mexico to Europe I would. In fact it would fit rather neatly into the Mediterranean Sea.'

Well, I say, before you do that there is the little matter of the 1988 presidential election. It is widely asserted that the PRI, and its candidate Carlos Salinas, lost the election and fixed the result.

'Oh, 1988 was a good thing for us. It made us realize that we couldn't just sit back and wait for people to come and vote for us. We had to get out there and knock on doors.'

The PRI's policies today, I suggest, are less revolutionary than neo-liberal.

'We do not use the word "neo-liberal",' she says sharply, a warning edge to her voice. 'We call our policies "social liberal".'

Surely the effect of such policies is divisive and generates widespread suffering. In Britain there has, I say, been a great deal of unhappiness as a result of our 'social liberal' experiment.

'Unhappiness? Suffering? In Britain?' Roberta looks genuinely sceptical. I mention unemployment.

'Oh, we have not forgotten the poor in Mexico. Our Solidarity programme sees to that. We spend billions of pesos, yes billions, to compensate those who have been adversely affected by the modernization of Mexico.'

Since the Revolution most Mexican governments have felt it wise to remain at something of an arm's length from the US. Yet now, with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), is Mexico finally getting into bed with Uncle Sam?

'We have not put all our eggs in one basket,' says Roberta. 'Of course we want to have a good relationship with the US, and NAFTA will be a good thing for us. Besides, the influences are not all one-way. Many Mexicans live in the US. We also have a free-trade agreement with Chile, and are working on similar agreements with other Latin American countries... Mexico can compete with the world. Our industry is efficient and our education excellent. Illiteracy has been conquered in Mexico.'

All is for the best in the best of all possible worlds – but when a revolutionary party turns 'social liberal' this can have a disorientating effect on the conservative opposition. I go to the National Action Party (PAN) ready to meet hard-nosed young men in flashy suits. I find instead José Angel Conchello, an urbane and charming man in his fifties.

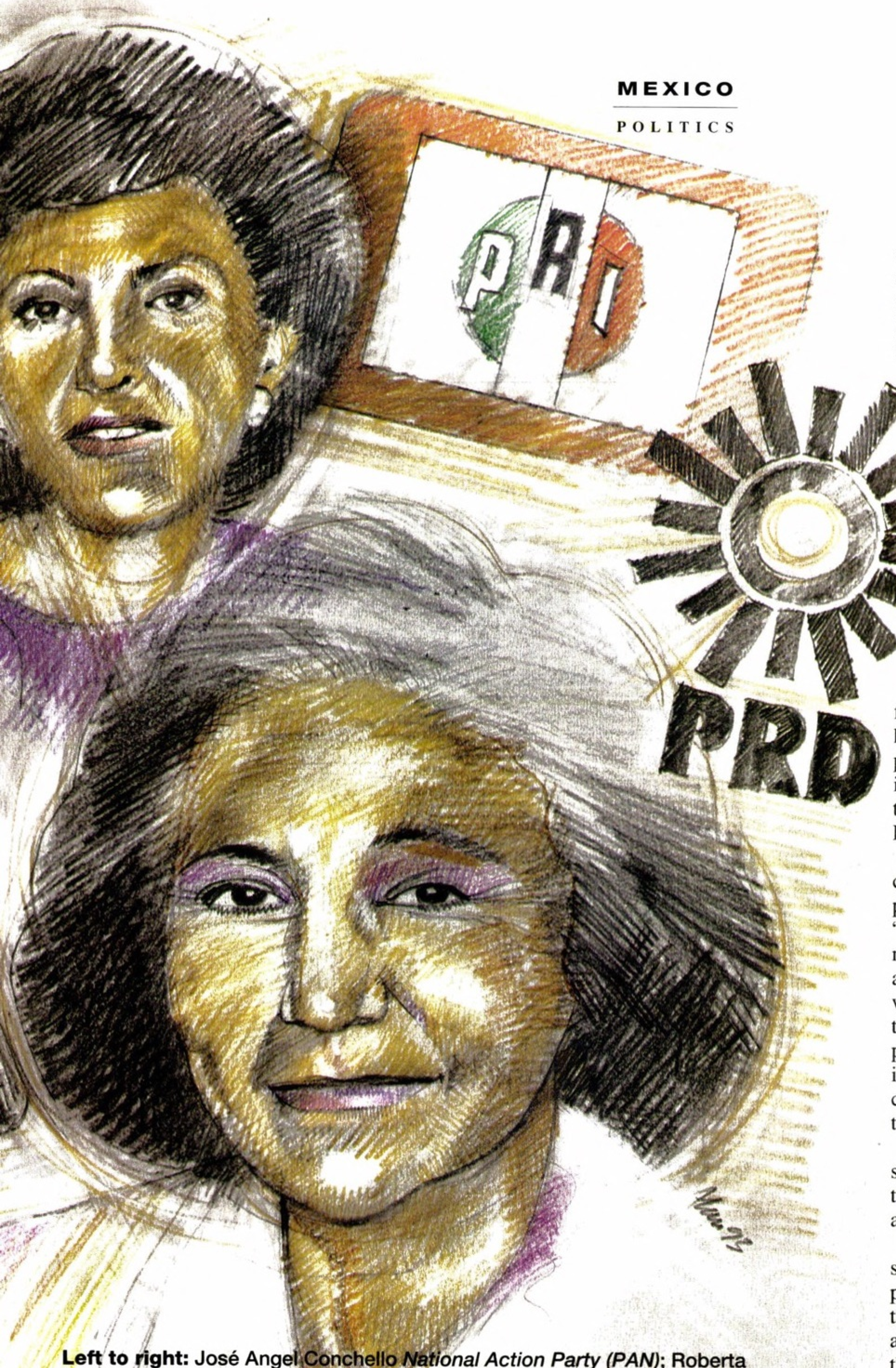
'Unlike the right-wing parties who talk of private property as a "freedom",' he begins, 'we have always referred to it as a responsibility. Business is a social responsibility. Capitalists have responsibilities to their workers and to society.'

So I am not about to be subjected to an extreme right-wing diatribe. PAN was founded because of what was perceived to be widespread electoral fraud in the 1930s – it's a long-running issue here. 'In Mexico the right to vote is not considered a human right,' says José. 'The Constitution, absurdly enough, says that voting in elections is a "privilege" for Mexicans. So there are no proper mechanisms for appeal against abuse.'

He has a radical view on NAFTA, not necessarily shared by his party. 'After 30 years of protectionism, the Government virtually abolished trade tariffs with the US unilaterally and overnight. There was no preparation. This, together with the inequality of income distribution both within Mexico and between Mexico and the US, accounts for what is now an enormous trade deficit with North America.

'People say there is a process of "globalization" going on. Quite the contrary. It is a process of "regionalization" making Mexico part of the US. There may be a temporary advantage for Mexico in NAFTA, attracting foreign businesses and investment. But it will last only so long as labour costs in Mexico are low. As soon as they begin to increase, these same businesses will go to Guatemala or Bangladesh.

'For Mexico this is a situation of false prosperity. There may be more wealth, but not more well-being... There already is a big dose of unemployment and the Government shows no inclination to do anything at all about it. It is neo-liberal in the extreme... They say your Prince of Wales is president of a community business association or something of the kind.



Left to right: José Angel Conchello *National Action Party (PAN)*; Roberta Lajous *Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)*; Ifigenia Martínez *Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD).*

He understands what has to be done.'

PAN's chief rival in opposition is the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). José accepts with a smile the common jibe that PAN has a good programme but no presidential candidate, while the PRD has a good presidential candidate but no programme.

That candidate is Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the son of Lázaro Cárdenas who was President of Mexico in the 1930s and is still widely revered as the man who did more than any other to consolidate the populist gains of the Revolution. Cuauhtémoc broke from the PRI to challenge for the presidency in 1988 and, against all expectations, probably won. Now he's running again.

I am supposed to be meeting him, but since he's campaigning hard already (the PRD is often said to be a 'one-man party') he's difficult to track down and on the appointed day makes off for Chihuahua to talk with a defector from the PAN. I turn instead to Ifigenia Martínez, who runs the PRD's research institute. She is a partisan, though respected and extremely articulate economist. I'm inclined to ask her about the British monarchy, but on second thoughts realize that both Roberta and José were probably just being courteous.

'If what you're looking for is the reduction of inflation and a surplus on the public accounts,' she says, 'why then Mexico is a resounding success. No other country in the whole world has a budget surplus like Mexico's. But if what you're looking for is the maximum possible development, fair distribution of resources and a balanced trading account with the outside world, then Mexican policy is no less of a resounding and overwhelming failure.'

According to Ifigenia the Mexican economy has grown at a very slow rate or not at all while foreign debt has actually increased at the end of a decade dedicated to reducing it. Meanwhile unemployment has soared and government spending on social priorities, which used to account for about 12 per cent of national income, has been slashed through the Solidarity programme to a mere 3 per cent of national income. Even this is not universal but has to be begged for like charity from the President himself.

NAFTA is, she says, 'merely a key to close this model'. It leaves Mexico completely dependent upon the US. 'The "international market" for Mexico now means the US. We have closed off the alternatives in an extremely dangerous way. Everything is wrapped up in something very, very rotten... Government policy, in a very practical way, serves the interests of the great transnational companies, leaving us without any means to regulate them.

'You know, all this is pretty ironic, considering that the US is the biggest debtor of them all. But the same requirements do not apply to them.

'Well, we live in a cruel world... The salvation for Mexico will be that it will prove impossible to continue with this rotten system. It's a system that leads to authoritarianism. It is constructed to serve the interests of a very, very few people, and it simply cannot continue... Every country must make its own contribution in a world that is becoming progressively more interdependent.'

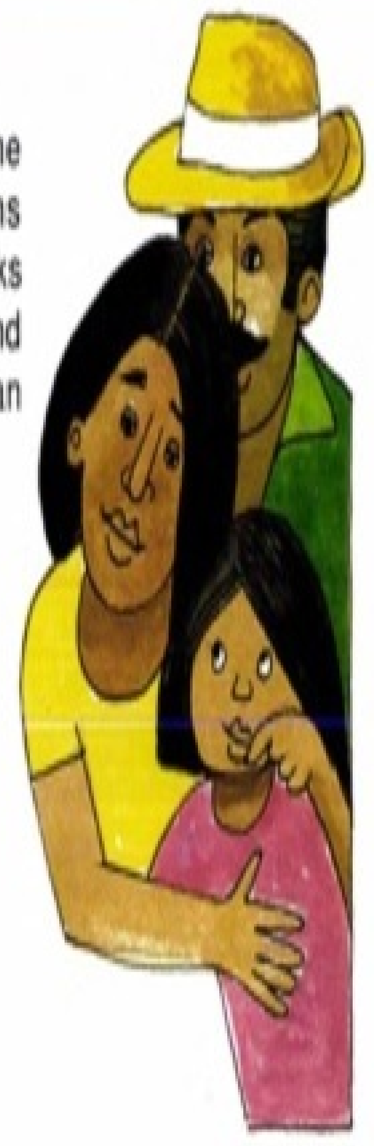
Much of political debate in Mexico is about democracy itself. There are two things that undermine it. One is the fact that the PRI still controls the electoral machinery. Even if it wins the presidential election – and many people in Mexico appear to believe that it will – no-one will know for certain whether it was the voters or the machinery that decided.

More to the point, whoever wins, in crucial areas it will not be the government that governs but the IMF, the World Bank and the 'global economy'. Like the large number of Mexicans who don't bother to vote at all, one is then left wondering what the point of the whole elaborate ritual really is. ■

ILLUSTRATION: ALAN HUGHES

MEXICO – THE FACTS

Basic Indicators[1,2]



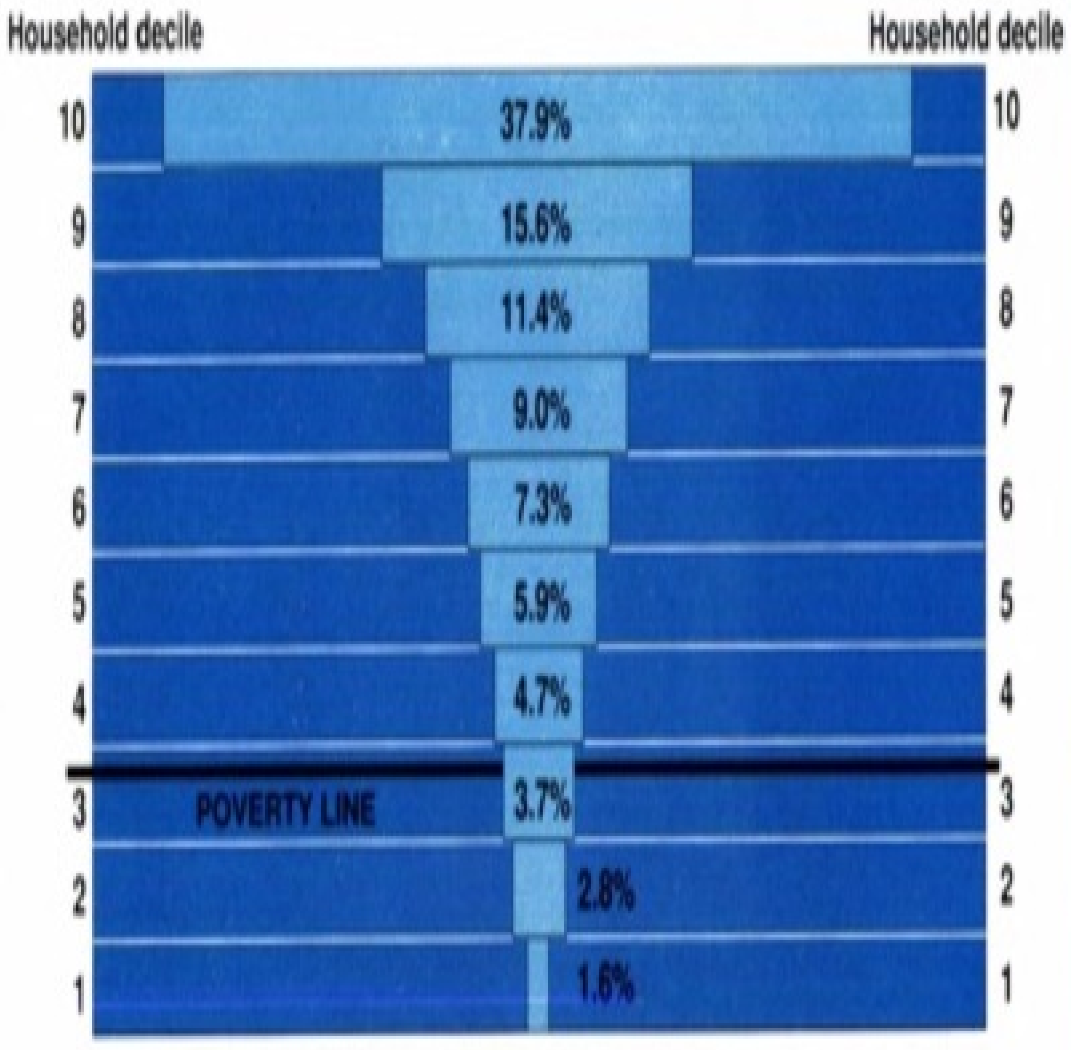
Mexico is placed 46th out of 160 countries on the Human Development Index of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). This index ranks countries according to life expectancy, education and income. Mexico falls just within the 'high human development' band, which is headed by Canada.

- Life expectancy at birth 1990: 69.7 years (US 75.9)
- Adult literacy rate 1990: 87(%) (US 99)
- Mean years of schooling 1990: 4.7 (US 12.3)
- Under 5 mortality rate 1991: 37 (US 11)
- Index of food production 1991: 97 (1979-81 = 100)
- Daily per capita calorie supply as % of requirements 1988-90:131 (US 138)
- Per cent of population with access to:
  - safe water (1988-90): 71
  - adequate sanitation (1988-90): 77
  - health services (1985-88): 78

Rich and poor[1]

Income distribution within Mexico is starkly unequal, leaving almost one-third of the population below the poverty line even by official calculations. Just 35 of Mexico's richest families take more than the poorest 15 million Mexicans.

Distribution of household income,1989
(per cent of total national income earned by each tenth of the population, richest at the top.)



Shaping up[1]

Mexico is applying to join the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the 'Club' for the 24 richest countries in the world. Comparison with them shows that there are still big, sometimes unexpected, differences. Government expenditure as a proportion of national income (GDP) is less than half the OECD average. Income distribution is considerably worse. An estimated 25 per cent of the Mexican work force is unemployed or working in the 'informal' sector.

	OECD average	Mexico	Rank
Area (Million Km$_2$)	1.3	2.0	4
Population (millions)	35.7	86.3	3
Total output (billions $)	684.4	241.4	11
Employment as % of population	52.7	28.8	23
Government expenditure as % GDP	46.6	26.0	25
Labour share of GDP	51.4	24.6	25
GDP per capita ($ purchasing power)	21,438	5,482	24

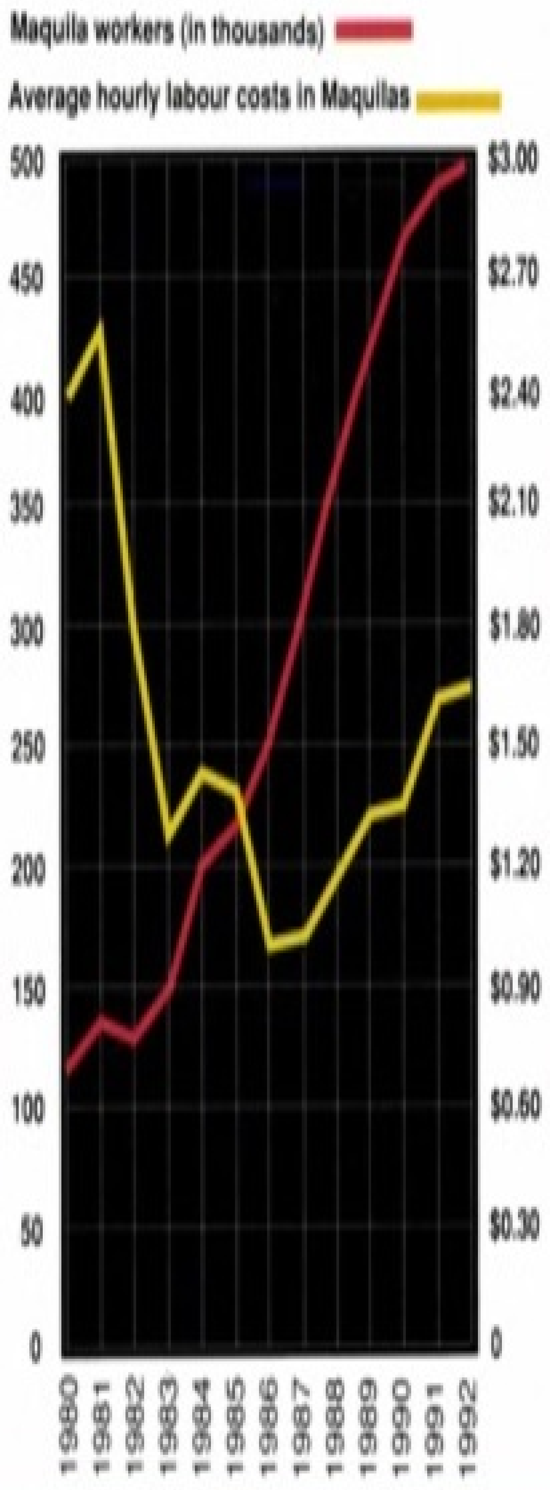
Some things in Mexico seem to be going right. Inflation is down, the currency is stable and the Stock Exchange is booming. But people are still earning less than they were in 1980. Environmental problems have multiplied. Inequality and hardship have spiralled.

RENE BURRI / MAGNUM

Cheap labour[3]

During the economic crisis of the early 1980s real wages in Mexico fell sharply and a corresponding increase in employment in the *maquiladora* export-only plants took place.This fuelled the belief that cheap labour in Mexico was undercutting labour in Canada and the USA.

Hourly cost of labour in Mexico and growth of *maquiladora* employment

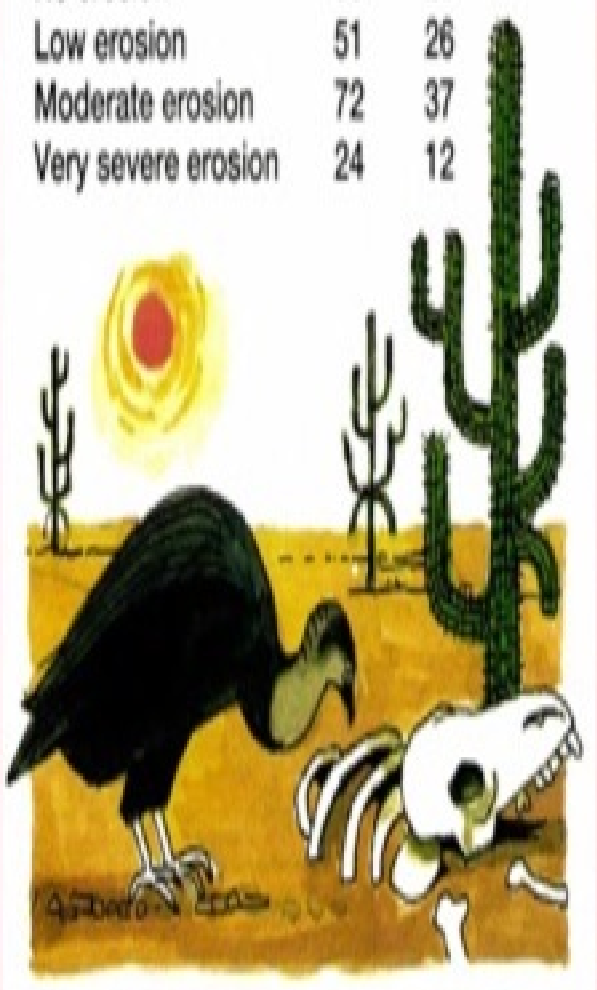


Eroded environment[1]

Mexico's generally mountainous environment is extremely fragile. Much of the surface area is either desert or forests on thin sloping soils which are vulnerable to erosion. Just one-fifth of Mexico's land area is not affected by erosion at all.

Soil erosion in Mexico 1991

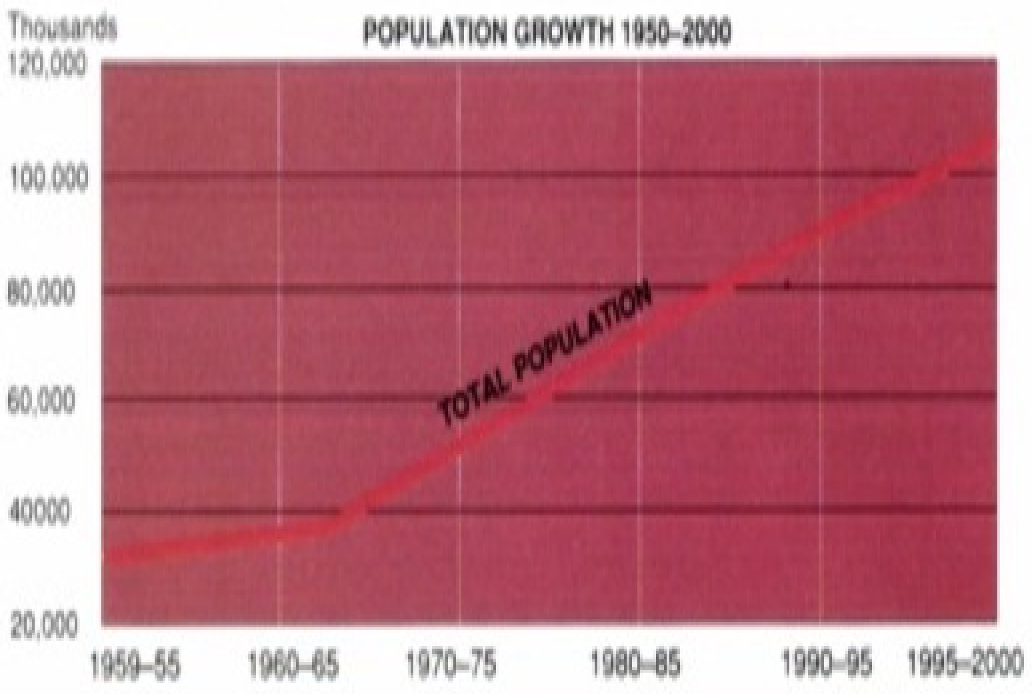
	Million hectares	per cent of total
No erosion	39	20
Low erosion	51	26
Moderate erosion	72	37
Very severe erosion	24	12

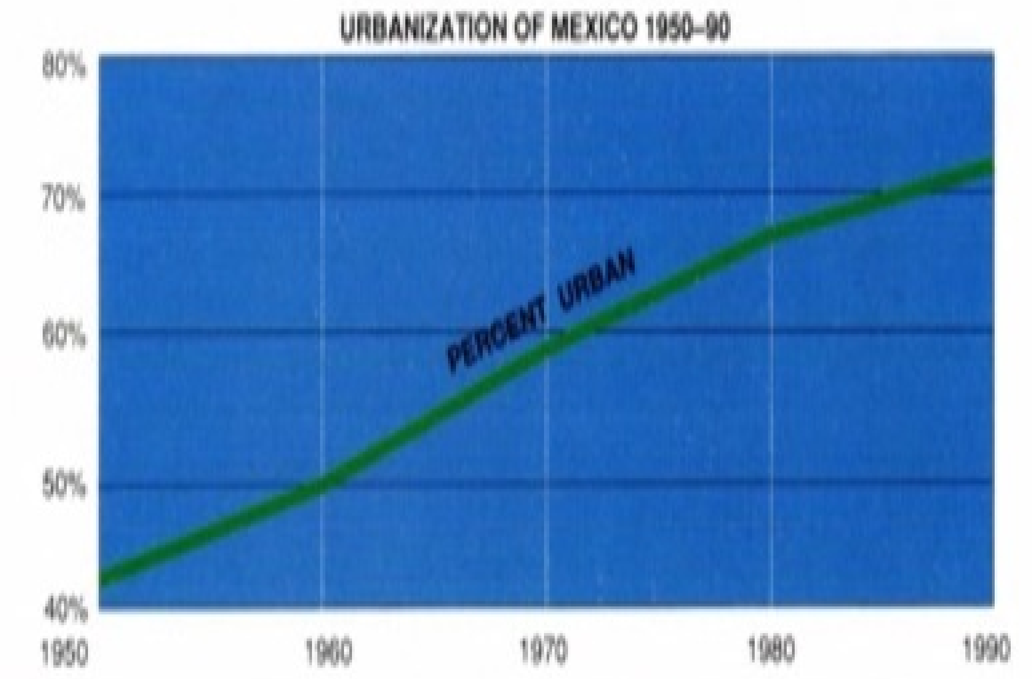


Urban sprawl[2]

The proportion of a growing population that lives in Mexican cities has increased dramatically.

Urban and population growth in Mexico 1950 to 1990





Political monopoly[1]

The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), in addition to controlling the all-powerful presidency, also monopolizes the Mexican Parliament.

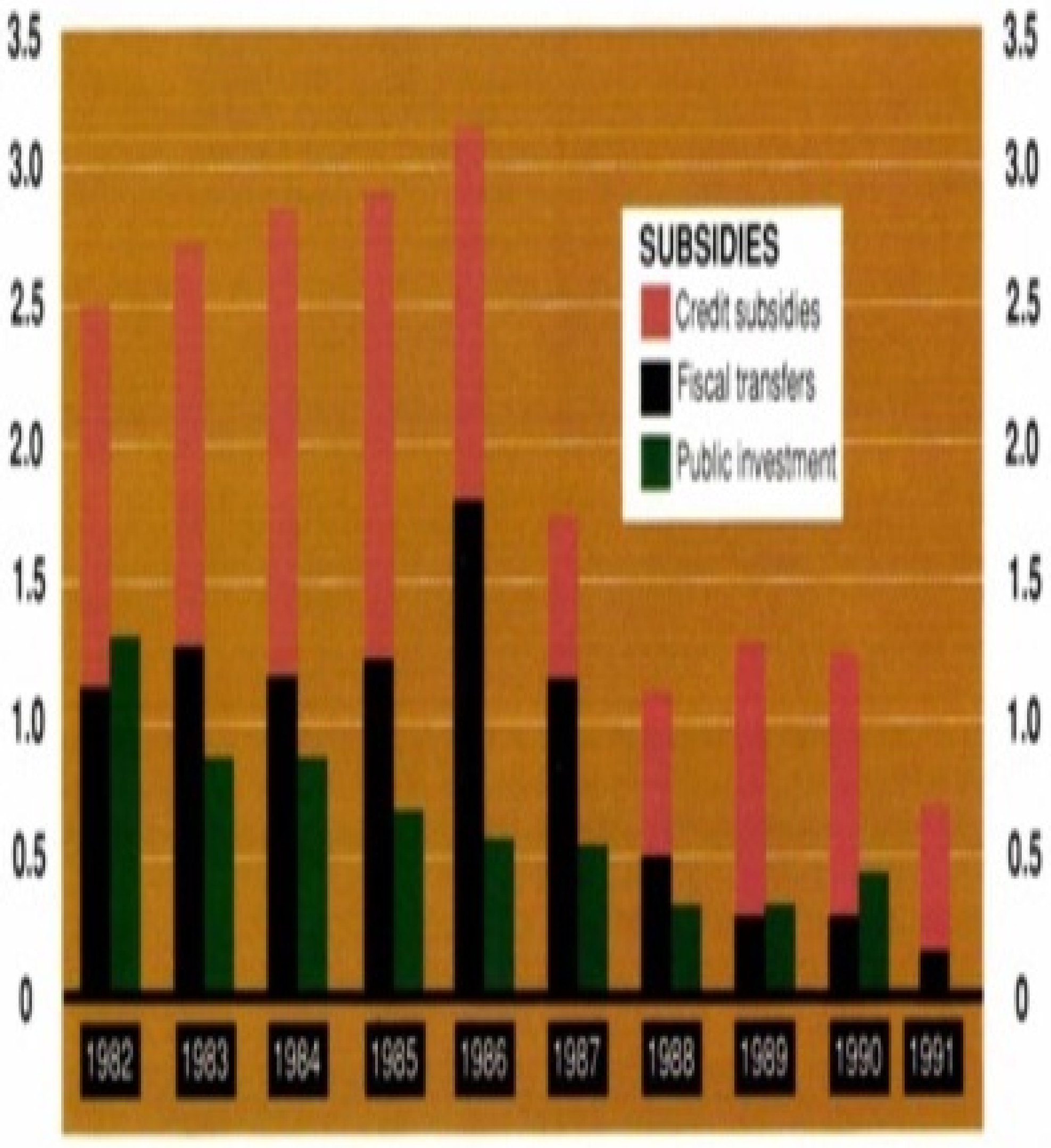
Composition of Parliament (% of seats 1992)

	Senate	Deputies
Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)	95	65
National Action Party (PAN)	2	16
Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD)	3	8
Other	-	10

Rural retreat[1]

'Structural adjustment' has created the biggest crisis in Mexican agriculture since the Revolution. Small-scale producers now face competition from cheap US imports of staples like maize, while government support has been cut back drastically.

Public investment in agriculture 1982 – 1991 (as per cent of GDP).



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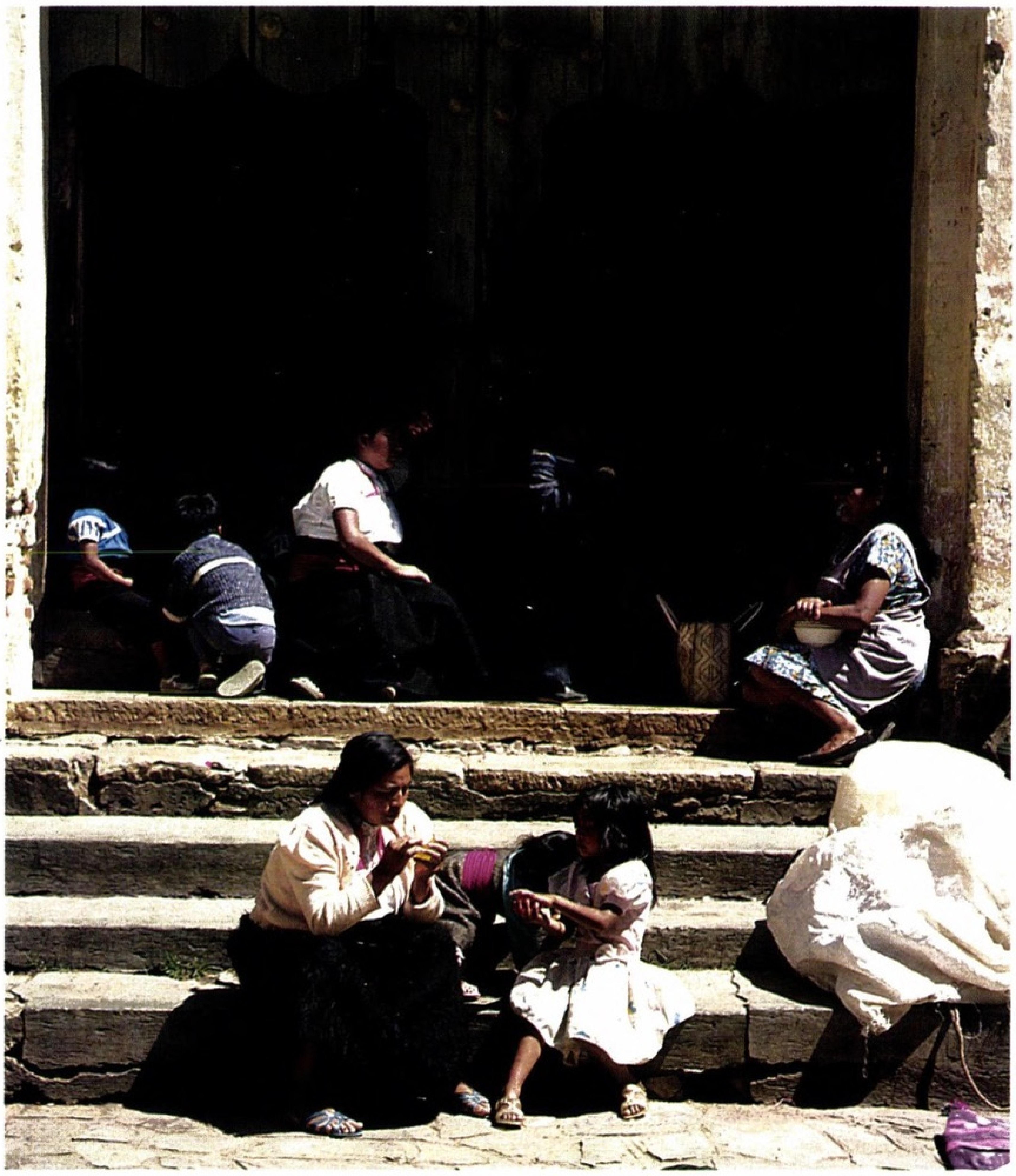
1 OECD Economic Surveys 1991/2: *Mexico – Special Survey of a non-Member Country*, Paris, 1992. 2 Tom Barry (ed), *Mexico, A Country Guide*, The Inter-Hemispheric Education Resource Center, Albuquerque, New Mexico,1992. 3 Harry Browne and Beth Sims, *Runaway America*, Resource Center Press, Alburquerque, New Mexico, 1993.

A parable and your cup of coffee

The south-eastern state of Chiapas is neglected, hard to live in and wonderful to look at. But those twin bastions of tradition, the Catholic Church and rural life, have a radical edge of their own in Mexico's poorest state.



DAVID RANSOM

Indigenous people occupy the church of Santo Domingo in San Cristóbal de las Casas.

UNTIL quite recently priests were not allowed to wear their robes in public in Mexico, and few do so even now. The Revolution contained a strong anticlerical element (the Catholic hierarchy had largely opposed it) inherited from the nineteenth century and the immense power and conservatism of the Mexican Catholic Church. Chiapas was one of the places Graham Greene came to in the 1930s to write about the persecution of the Church. But some 90 per cent of Mexicans still call themselves practising Catholics. Now there is a growing closeness between church and government hierarchies. The Pope has made three visits to Mexico.

Samuel Ruiz, the Bishop of San Cristóbal for the past 30 years, is a radical and as such a rarity. He is an active promoter of human rights, with a centre based in his cathedral, and an advocate for the largely Maya indigenous peoples of the region – he speaks two of their languages – who comprise a large majority of the population. I wonder how he feels about the new situation. He answers at a tangent.

'The original Christian evangelization of the continent was – lamentably enough – identified not just with a religion but with a culture,' he says. 'The identification of the Christian religion with Western culture meant that a different identity from that of the indigenous peoples was imposed upon the continent.

'This has generated a kind of schizophrenia. Priests feel torn between two identities, the culture they were born with and a religious identity that can only be expressed through another culture. So now, after 500 years, we cannot express our religious faith through our own culture, in our own way, rather than through the philosophies of Aristotle... But change is coming. The way it comes about can be quite extraordinary, quite unforeseen.

'About ten years ago I visited a community called Tenango. I can't honestly remember whether I was on horseback or on foot. You must wait outside such a community to be met. Unfortunately, the more dignified you are the further outside the community you are expected to wait and the further you then have to walk into it.

'Anyway, I was duly welcomed and went in search of the community. We arrived at the church and exchanged greetings. I asked them – not rhetorically but quite genuinely – at what time the celebration of the Eucharist and the confirmations that were planned would be convenient. They were completely taken aback. They had no idea.

'Well, to keep things going I made a

grotesque suggestion: "Would one o'clock in the morning be OK?". They laughed, of course. So I said: "At eight in the morning, then?". "Yes, that's fine, at eight then," they agreed.

'"And is that convenient for the women?" I asked. "Oh, no, *señor obispo*," they replied, "that's when they make our coffee and tortillas".

'Well, there followed an altercation between the men and the women, who eventually proposed 10 in the morning and everything was fine.

'Three years later, when I returned, I was met at the same place and they said: "Well, *señor obispo*, we didn't know exactly when to expect you, but we calculated more or less such-and-such a time. We'll go and have a meal at such-and-such a time. Then you'll probably want to have a rest. We'll celebrate Mass tomorrow." A complete programme had been prepared for me.

'There was nothing *political* in this, you understand, but it clearly was an act of great political significance. They knew that their opinions counted for something, that they were the ones who had to make decisions, that the women also must speak and decide.

'That was an advance. We went on to discuss, for example, how the oppression they suffered did not always come from far away. I remember saying to the men: "Look, my brothers, how strange! How is it that the men have sandals and boots and shoes but our sisters, the women, don't have anything to wear on their feet at all?"

'Well, they reacted to that a bit, and started searching around for explanations. "You see, *señor obispo*," they said, "we are poor. What can we do? We don't have enough for everyone. And, well, we have to walk long distances. That's why we are the ones who have sandals, boots and shoes."

'"Oh, I see," I replied. "And that brother there. That cassette recorder he's holding, I wonder how much that would have cost?" "Well, we, er... He got some money..." They started to look at each other, at the ones who were in better shape. It was clear that the words "we are poor" did not have an exact or universal application.

'Then a woman said: "My husband says the men have the shoes because they have to walk a long way to work on the land, where the maize is. But we women also have to walk, to where the water is, carrying heavy jars. We have to make the meals, wash clothes, care for the children. Often we have to walk much further."

'There followed a debate. It led on to what you might call an unforced contemplation of the things that weren't working in that community, a realization that there is such a thing as internal oppression. As one woman said: "It looks as if we've got a few things to straighten out here".'

◆

TRAVEL south to the border with troubled Guatemala, where for a generation the Maya people have faced unaided a new genocidal assault, and you enter what is simultaneously an ecological reserve and an environmental catastrophe.

Billboards tell you that Comitán is a town 'without rubbish'. Ecological institutes and thousands of white-painted trellis boxes for young trees line the roads. Here, reaching north-east to the Yucatan peninsular, is the Lacandon Forest, the unique density of its cedar woods thinned to a fragile veil. 'Green' trees may no longer be felled, so trucks lumber past with logs blackened by the fire-raising that makes their felling 'legal'. The blood-red wounds of eroded soil scar the skin-tissue of the land.

Just a third of the Mexican population, some 30 million people, still make their living from the land. But that is more than used to live in the entire country less than 50 years ago. And Mexico cannot feed itself.

To die on your feet...

More than any other, Emiliano Zapata epitomized the radical cutting edge of the Revolution, which killed one-eighth of the Mexican population.

Born in 1879, Emiliano Zapata inherited a small plot of land from his family. He lived as a muleteer, horse trainer and stable master. In 1909 he was elected to local office by the villagers of Anenecuilco in the state of Morelos, just south of Mexico City.

Shortly after the outbreak of the Revolution against the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz in 1910 Zapata began recruiting an insurgent army, helped by his ability to speak the Náhuatl language.

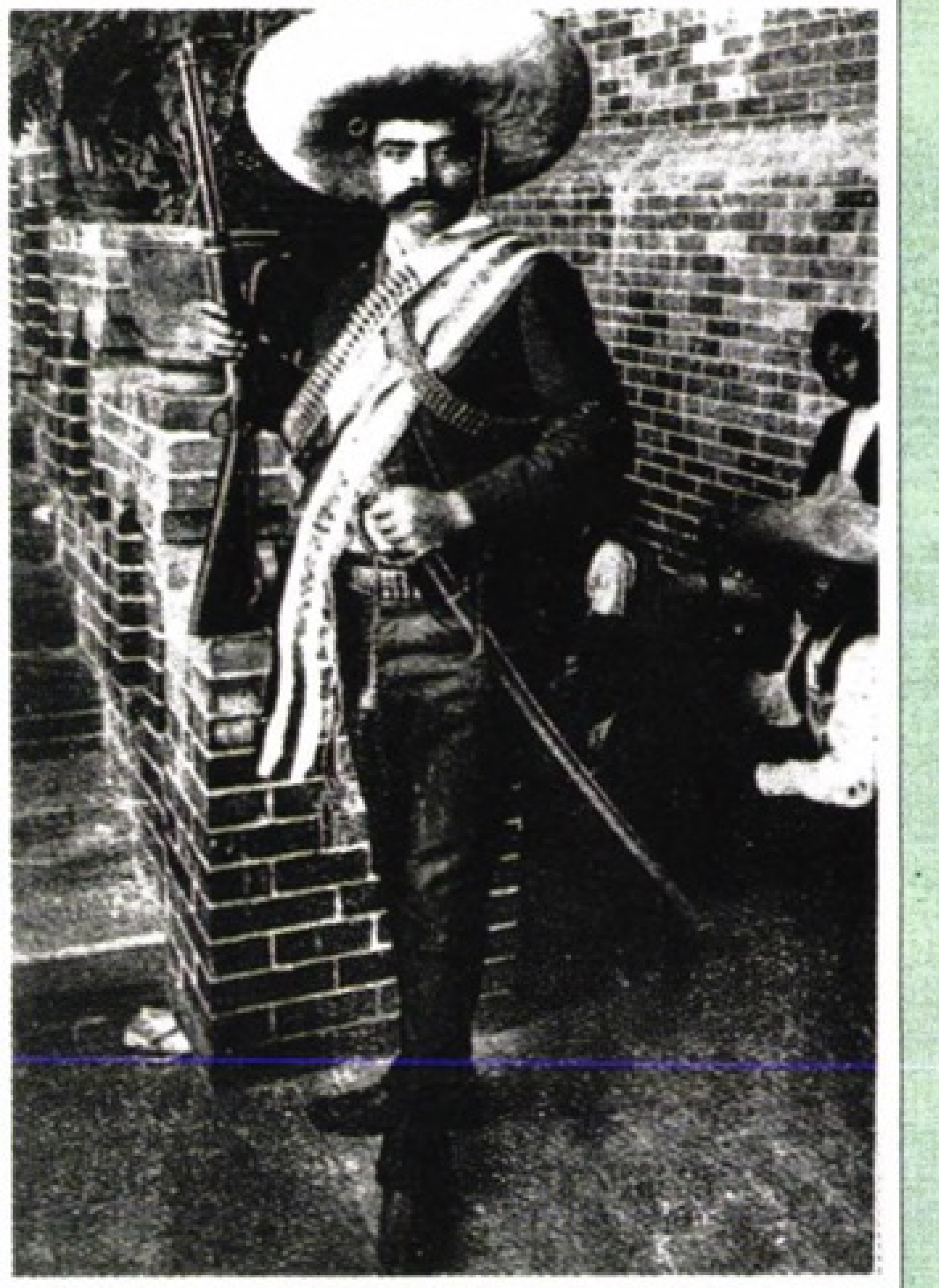
Zapata's main concern was the restoration of lands seized from the peasantry under Porfirio Díaz. After the resignation of Díaz in 1911 Zapata refused to demobilize his army until this demand had been met. In November he promulgated the *Plan de Ayala* which spelled out the demand for agrarian reform:

'The lands, woods and water that have been usurped... will be immediately restored to the villages or citizens who have title to them... Because the great majority of Mexicans own nothing more than the land they walk on... one-third of these properties will be expropriated, with prior indemnification, so that the villages and citizens of Mexico may obtain *ejidos*, sites for towns, and fields.'

Armed conflict with the government of Francisco Madero in Mexico City began immediately and quickly spread to neighbouring states. By early 1912 the federal army had been repeatedly defeated.

Following the overthrow of Madero by a coup in February 1913, Zapata refused to submit to the government of Victoriano Huerta that replaced it or to ally with the 'Constitutionalist' opposition in northern Mexico. Zapata is credited with coining the phrase (later taken up in the Spanish Civil War): 'It is better to die on your feet than live on your knees'.

Huerta's government fell in 1914. At the Convention of Aguascalientes that followed, Zapatista delegates argued that the Revolution had been fought for 'land and liberty' rather than constitutional reform. A temporary alliance was formed with Pancho Villa from northern Mexico.



Zapata: citizen, peasant and revolutionary.

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During the next chaotic and violent years Zapata remained in opposition to every head of state that emerged. In March 1919 he directed an 'open letter' to President Venustiano Carranza:

'As a citizen, as someone with the right to think and speak, as a peasant fully aware of the needs of the humble people, as a revolutionary and a leader of great numbers, I address myself to you, Citizen Carranza... You turned the struggle to your own advantage and to serve the interests of those who helped you rise, then shared the spoils – riches, honours, businesses, banquets, orgies... The old landholdings have been taken over by new landlords... and the people mocked in their hopes.'

Carranza devised an elaborate scheme to get rid of Zapata. A federal colonel, Jesús Guajardo, feigned a mutiny and offered to join Zapata with 500 men, their arms and ammunition. As proof of good faith several Zapatista defectors were tried by court-martial and executed, and the town of Jonacatepec was 'captured' in Zapata's name. A conference was set for 10 April 1919 at the Hacienda de Chinameca in Zapata's home territory. Zapata rode into the hacienda with just 10 men: the ceremonial guard turned their guns on him and he died in a hail of bullets.

The answer, says the Government, is to sell tropical fruit to the Americans and buy cheap maize back. But at the low price of American maize no-one in Mexico can afford to cultivate it as a cash crop – and many rural communities depend upon maize for their very survival. There is a crisis in rural Mexico more profound than anything faced since the Revolution.

'Here the "modern" way of industrial agriculture is not appropriate,' says José Juárez Varela. He works for the Union de Ejidos de la Selva (the Union of Rural Collectives in the Forest) and we're talking in his office in Las Margaritas, ten kilometres to the east of Comitán. 'We have no infrastructure, roads, communications, technical services, and the urban markets are a long way away. The land is extremely delicate and mountainous, unsuitable for machinery.

'Even agricultural reform arrived here late. It wasn't until the 1950s that people started leaving the *fincas*, the great estates, freeing themselves from debt-bondage and setting up *ejidos*, collective farms. They began to move into the forest and to grow whatever they were used to growing: bananas, maize, coffee.'

The *ejidos* joined together to form a union. 'We learned a lot and we had a good time,' says José, 'but we weren't making a living'. The government began to withdraw its assistance programmes. The Union went through a crisis. Some felt like giving up.

José and a small group from the Union toured the country, talking to other unions and consultants. One practical result came from a meeting with a group in Oaxaca, the neighbouring state to the north, who were producing coffee for the Max Havelaar organization in the Netherlands, a trailblazing 'alternative trade' operation.

Growing pains: organic sapling gets going.

DAVID RANSOM

Summoned by trumpet (see far right): Genaro's wife and daughter make tortillas for my lunch.

On their return they decided to develop coffee production for 'niche' export markets, including Max Havelaar. This meant a very different relationship with coffee buyers, cutting out the middlepeople and obtaining a guaranteed minimum price in exchange for guaranteed quality.

The Union bought an old cotton warehouse in Comitán and converted it into a coffee storage and grading plant. Most of its production still goes onto the ordinary commercial market, but after the collapse of world coffee prices in 1989 the 'niche' market kept the Union alive. It's now beginning production for Twin Trading in the UK and for some specialist coffee traders in the US.

Now I know something of organizations like this, and I know they are small but beautiful things. Theory and practice do sometimes diverge, however, and I'm still sitting in an office. I ask if I can visit the producers, the *ejidatarios* in the forest.

It sounds like a simple request. But Las Margaritas is at the end of the road. The nearest producers, at Cruz del Rosario, are at least three hours' drive away over the kind of roads that, well, even a Volkswagen Beetle can't manage. If I want to go I'll have to drive myself there in a Chevrolet truck. Cirilo, who is supervising a new move towards organic coffee production, will come with us.

So we set out at dawn the next day and I begin to appreciate just what it takes to get this coffee to market. The road is a series of boulders perched over a succession of precipices, broken only by deep pits of mud.

We must announce our arrival at some distance from the village by blowing the truck horn – a reminder that intruders here are not always well intentioned. I feel as if I've spent three hours on a horse, which for me is severe punishment. We are greeted by a group of *ejidatarios* and eventually descend to the tropical forest in the small valley below, where coffee bushes grow under the shade of forest trees.

The ground is precipitous and has to be terraced. Rocks must be shifted by hand. The move to organic production means that no pesticides can be used to fend off disease – and no chemical fertilizers either. Instead, a special compost is laboriously prepared from animal droppings and leaf-mould. It takes at least three years for a bush to start producing.

DAVID RANSOM

I wonder whether all this additional labour, even for a better price, really pays off. There are a few hollow laughs. 'We are doing it for future generations,' says Cirilo, who looks with pride on the healthy plants.

It's a long, long process. Seeds have to be germinated, planted out and transplanted. The bushes have to be tended and fertilized until they begin to produce. In November the harvest starts, the ripe red coffee berries are gathered, the husks removed, the beans washed and laid out to dry on concrete beds. This being the tropics, the drying beans have to be constantly gathered in and spread out again to avoid showers of rain. Then they are bagged up and taken by truck to Comitán and the grading plant, where a series of machines selects out the best beans by size and weight: only 30 to 40 per cent of the original crop reaches the final hand-sorting stage, and then makes its way into boldly printed sacks of 70 kilos each. You'd expect such a sack to be worth its weight in gold: about $120 is the minimum price guaranteed by Max Havelaar.

I say to them that I will write about their work, and perhaps, just perhaps, more people will buy their coffee. I have no doubt at all that what Max Havelaar and Twin Trading are doing here is important. The Union feels it has a real status of partnership and respect – in which, incidentally, quality has become something near to an obsession. I have not the slightest doubt, either, that without them these people's lives would have been pushed beyond the point of endurance.

But still I wonder how it is that such toil, to produce what one might presume to be some nectar for a royal ritual, costs them their lives and us next to nothing. ■

For more information on the fair trading organizations mentioned here, contact: Aztec Harvest, Griswold, PO Box 769, Berkeley, Cal. CA94701, USA; Max Havelaar, Box 1252, 3500 BG, Utrecht, the Netherlands; Twin Trading, 5-11 Worship Street, London EC2A 2BH, UK.

Cross of the Rosary

Genaro Jiménez Hernandez is a respected figure in the *ejido* of Cruz del Rosario – Cross of the Rosary. We sit on the porch outside his house and for two hours he tells me the history of the place. What follows is a brief version of his account.

This region was once what we call 'national commons', common land. But in practice it had been claimed by a *finquero*, a big landowner. The forest is vast. Much of the land was empty.

Two men – we don't know how they met – came here to occupy it. In those days it wasn't like now, when you have to ask for land, to go through all sorts of formalities. Then you just went and had a look for what took your fancy.

So, about 90 years ago, they began work. After they'd been working for a while others passed by who had nowhere to go. The custom of landowners is, of course, to have their *mozos*, their 'boys'. So they began to take on workers until there were 33 of them in all. They divided the workers between them, 17 for one and 16 for the other. The obligation placed upon them was to work at least one day a week for the owners.

Time passed until 1954, when the fight for land after the Revolution began here – much later than elsewhere. Those who took up the cause of revolution had triumphed, and they made it possible for *ejidos*, state-owned collective farms, to be formed on the land. People began to form *colonias* everywhere.

But most landowners wanted to go on being landowners and did not want *ejidos*. Well, in those days people weren't able to figure things out for themselves. They didn't know how to go about setting up an *ejido*.

One of those two landowners here had three sons but preferred one of his nephews. He said to his nephew: 'I have more confidence in you than I do in my own sons. I can see that they want to create an *ejido* here, but I can't afford that. I too am poor. What do you recommend?'

His nephew replied: 'We are all needy people here. But I don't want to become a landowner. I want to be a *campesino* who helps others, so that others can have rights also.'

So his uncle said: 'Very well, make an *ejido* here then, if you can get an agreement with the 16 people who are here with me.'

So the nephew, who was my father, talked to the others and tried to convince them. But they weren't sure. They said: 'Amado and Clemente, the two owners, they're not going to want it'. My father told them what Clemente had said. They sent him to talk to Amado, but he would not agree.

Nonetheless they decided to begin proceedings with the Ministry of Land Reform in Comitán to set up the *ejido*. My father became ill. He hardly slept at all, trying to sort out documents, getting up at two in the morning to make the journey to Comitán. He ended up in hospital and worked from his hospital bed too.

About four months later the local *finquero*, the landlord Mateus Castellano, arrived in the village himself. He came to make threats against my father. He said: 'I know you're trying to form an *ejido* here, you're trying to take over a piece of my *finca*. If you go ahead with this and try to take over my land, make no mistake, we'll be back here during the night to throw you out.'

So my father said to him: 'Thank you, Don Mateus. We may be peasants but we are capable of thinking. With your words and your threats you treat us like fools. The time has come to put an end to this. I shall fight until I die for the *ejido*.'

I would not have known any of this if my father had not told me. I was two years old then. Now I am 37. So I know that it was 35 years ago that this happened. My father says he was born here, and he is 75. My grandmother was also born here and she is 90.

Eventually the *ejido* was established. Then the fight became less for land than for documents and plans. When final agreement was reached it turned out we had much less land than we started with, and only 23 *ejidatarios* remained. It was a struggle to survive, against illness too. We lived rather like caged animals. There were no roads, only paths. When someone was ill we had to carry them out on foot, on our shoulders, one or two days to Las Margaritas. Sometimes they would die before we got them there.

We had to go to Mexico City to ask the President of the Republic himself for a road here. The struggle cost us a lot. They say the road did eventually come in 1980 because the Government built it, which is true. But they did not build it because they wanted to, but because we demanded it.

In those days there was a lot more forest. When the road came so did the loggers to destroy the forest. To arrange things better we set up a Union, Tierra y Libertad (Land and Liberty), with other *ejidos*. This also cost us a lot. We struggled together, for the road, for our coffee, for the rural shops we need to buy our basic necessities.

Then problems began. We employed 'assessors' because we realized that to get anywhere we had to deal with the Government. Some didn't want to talk to the Government, saying it was better to stay independent. Some said, well after all, the Government's money is our money and we need it. So we separated off the unions, between the Forest and the Valley.

Now the law, Article 27 of the Constitution, is being changed. They're making it possible for *ejidatarios* to own their land as private property, to sell it off. But we have made it clear that the only road we want to follow is to keep our land collectively.

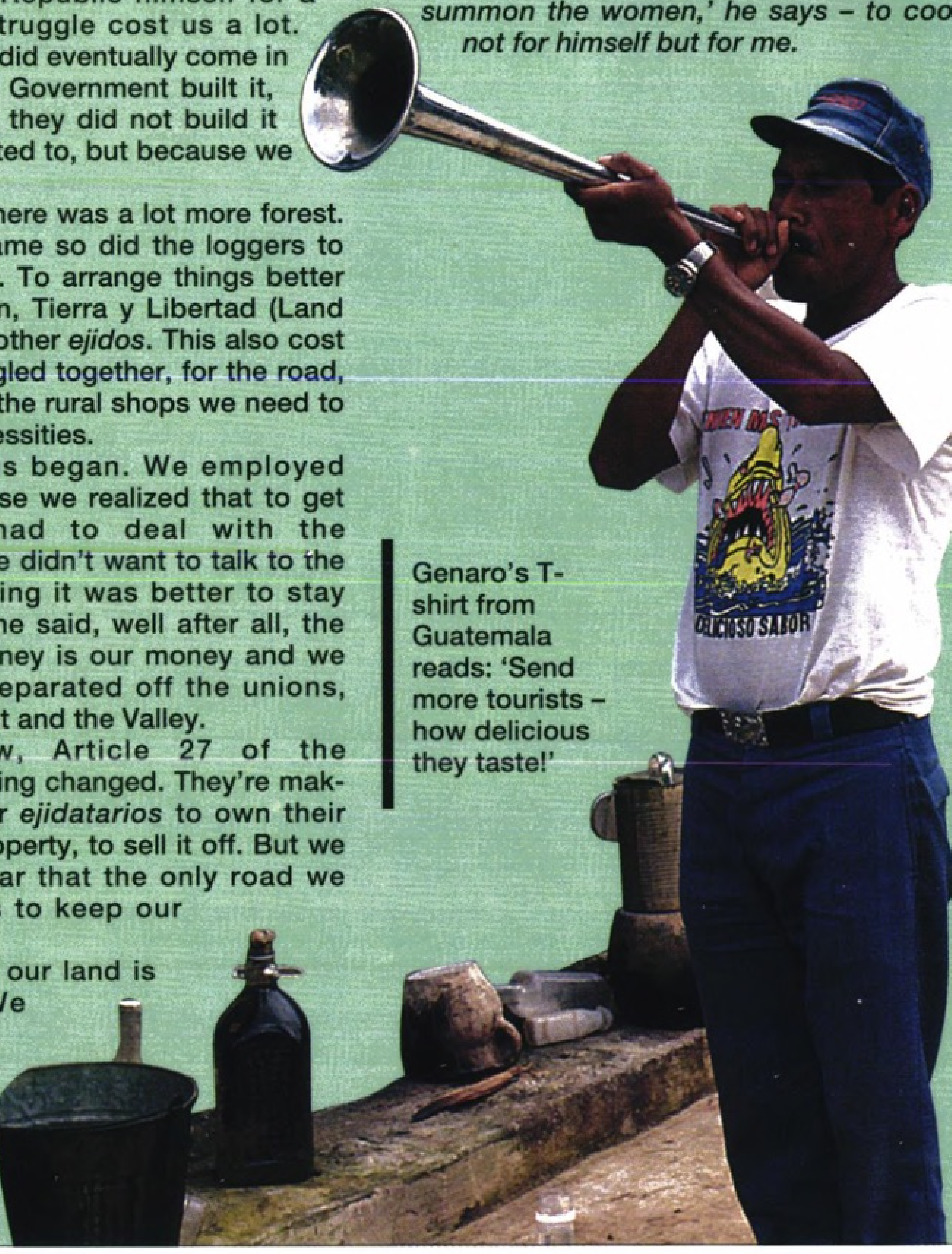
Why? Well, all our land is mountainous. We work small plots wherever we can. For example, I have one plot he near the village, another higher up the mountain, another down in the valley. If we go along with what the new Article suggests, it will be like it was before the Revolution, with Porfirio Díaz.

We remember that history. How the Government was in league with the landowners. All the land was owned by the rich and we had nothing. The Government may want to put an end to the agrarian reforms but we are going to decide for ourselves.

We have more experience now, and we're working out how best to protect and care for what has cost us so much, for the sake of our children, so that misery never returns to us again. That's the lesson of the story I have told you. I'm not saying we are rich, or even that we are no longer poor. But there is *change*. Then we were ashamed. Now we are proud.

One day I shall die, and with me this history that I have told you. But I want my children to know what we suffered, so that they will share things together and not be forced back into misery. If they know this history then they might think: 'Well, if my parents and their friends fought for this, so shall we'. It's a long road, we don't know where it will lead us and we'll never be certain that we've arrived.

So saying he takes a long silver trumpet and sends a faltering blast into the forest. 'To summon the women,' he says – to cook not for himself but for me.



Genaro's T-shirt from Guatemala reads: 'Send more tourists – how delicious they taste!'

DAVID RANSOM

Simply...

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MEXICO

1 RISE

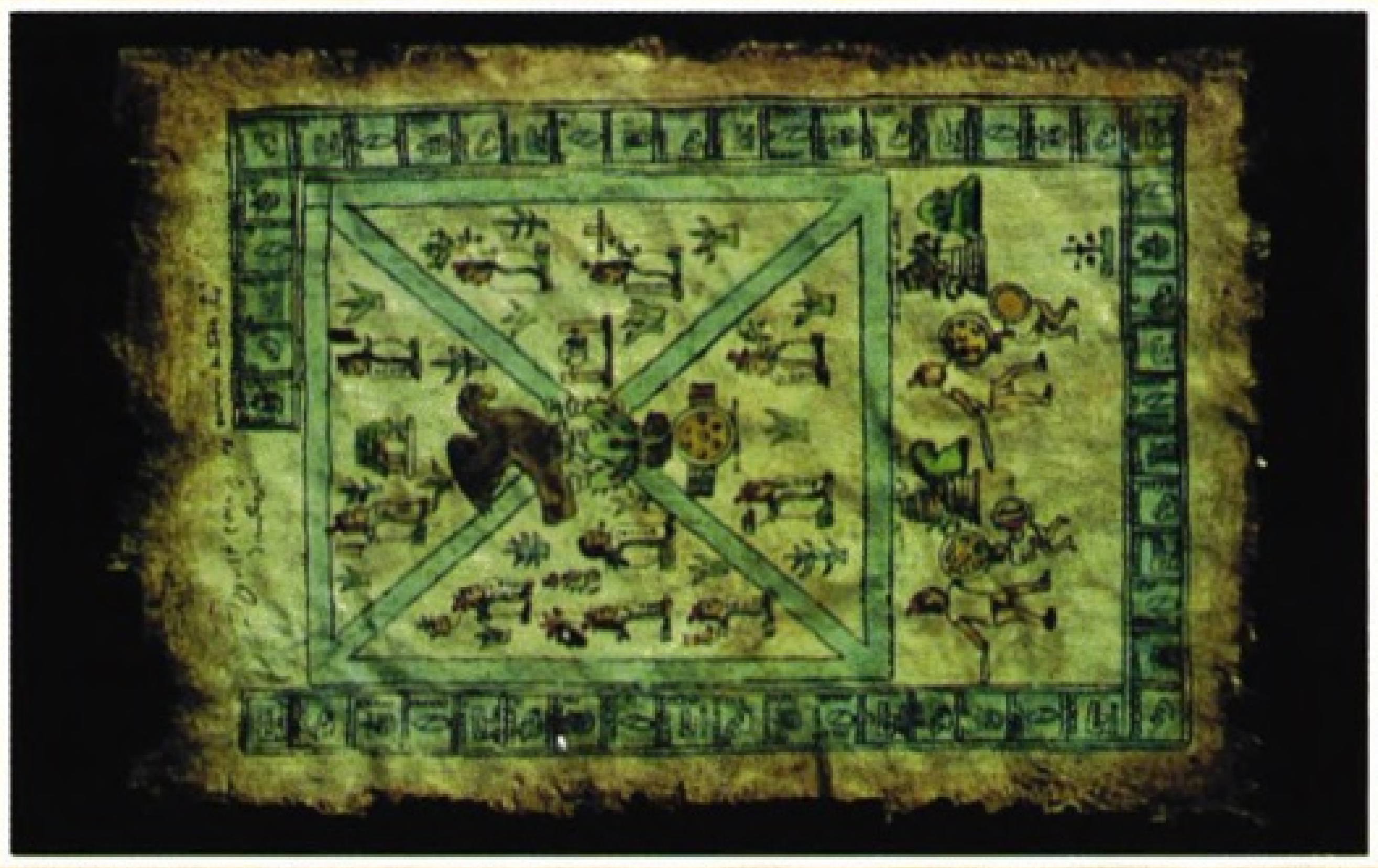
The first inhabitants of the Americas are thought to have crossed the Bering Straits from Asia around 50,000 BC. The earliest evidence of human life in central Mexico dates from about 20,000 BC, and the first signs of civilization appear in about 1,500 BC. Olmec cities were built in the jungles of the Gulf coast, and although little evidence of them remains the Olmecs were the first people in the Western hemisphere to work on hieroglyphic and numeric systems.

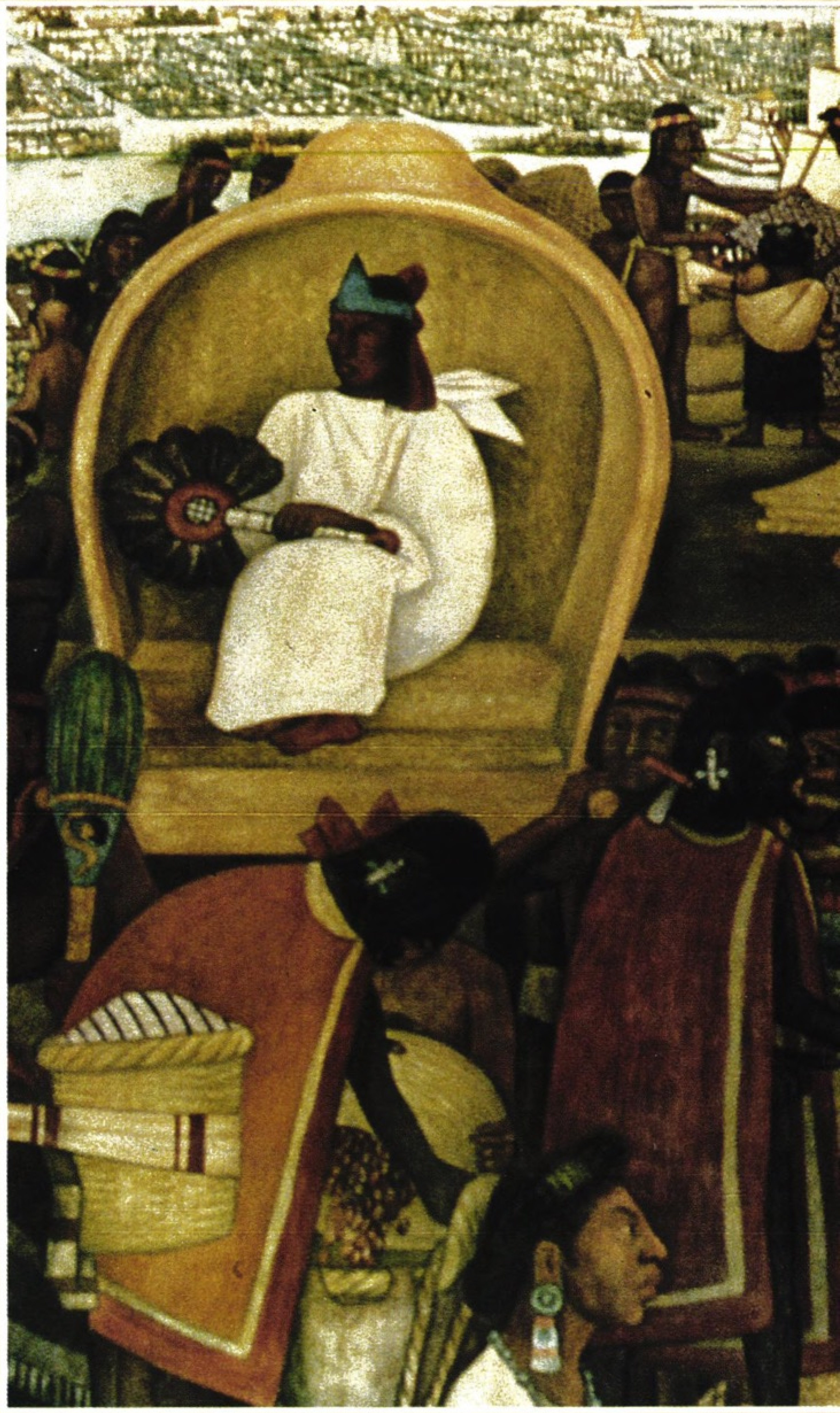
2 PEAK

In the Valley of Mexico Teotihuacán (a name later given to it by the Aztecs meaning 'the place where people became gods') became the first truly urban society in the Western hemisphere from about 300 AD. The huge pyramids of the Sun and Moon that remain today testify to an urban society ruled by a religious élite whose influence spread over a wide area. The gods Tlaloc (rain and fertility) and Quezalcoatl (the plumed serpent that brought civilization) made their first appearance. To the south the great Mayan centres in the lowlands of present-day Guatemala and Honduras reached their peak at about the same time and perfected an extraordinarily accurate calendar. But Teotihuacán was abandoned in mysterious circumstances around 750 AD, and the Mayan centres were also in decline by 800 AD.

3 DECLINE

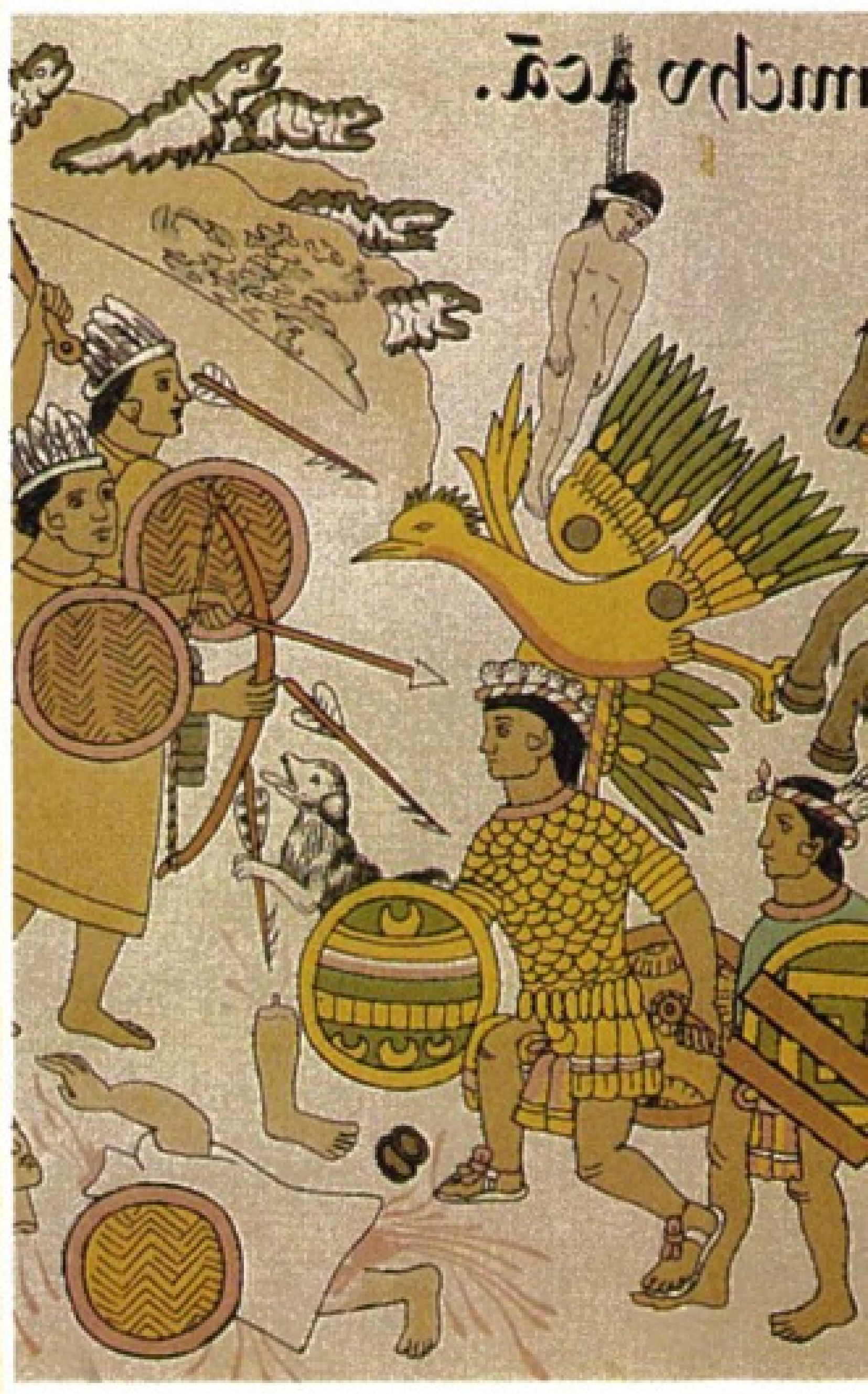
Wandering tribes known as Chichemec – which implies 'barbarian' – arrived in the Valley of Mexico from about 900 AD and began to construct cultures based on what remained of their predecessors'. The Toltecs were followed by the Aztecs, who arrived at the end of the twelfth century but did not begin to construct the great city of Tenochtitlan until 1345. Shifting alliances and constant warfare eventually gave the Aztecs control over much of central Mexico, although the Mixtecs in Oaxaca were not subjected until just before the arrival of the Spanish. The Maya were never conquered.



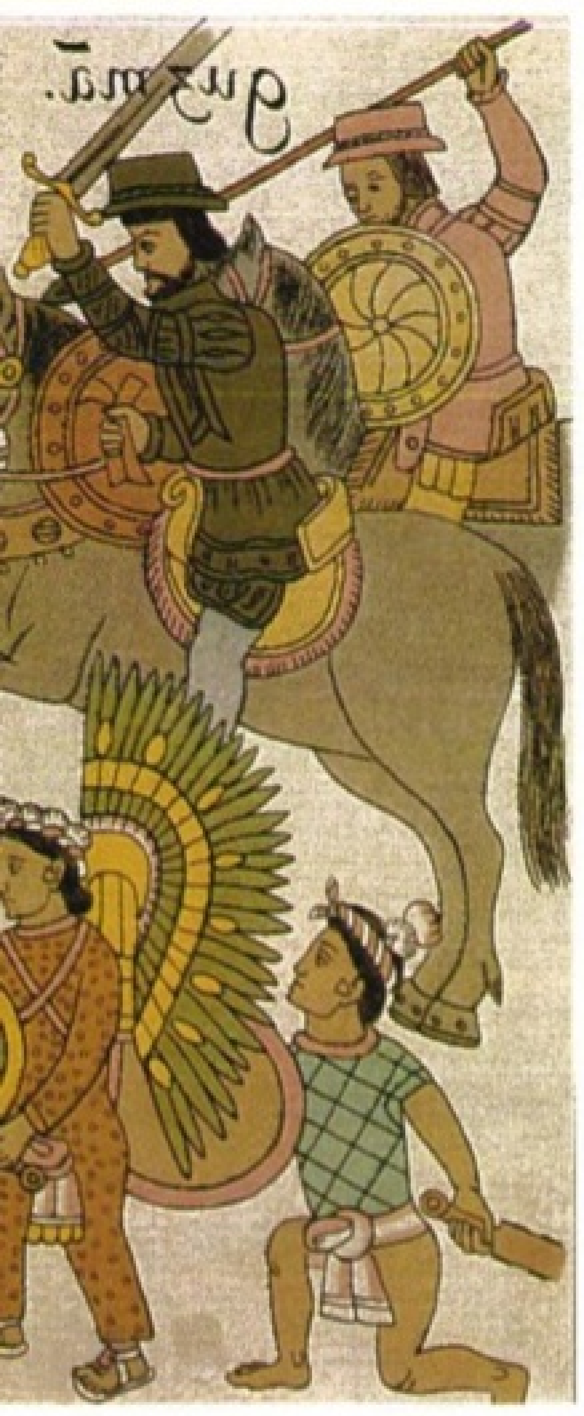


4 FALL

A Spanish expedition led by Hernan Cortés landed on the Gulf coast near Veracruz on 21 April 1519 with just 500 men, fighting dogs and horses. Cortés promptly burned the boats that had carried them from Spain to prevent his men from returning. In less than three years they were to establish control over most of Mexico. Their biggest asset was their ability to forge alliances with warring factions within the Aztec empire. They used gunpowder for surprise effect. The single-mindedness of their purpose (to enrich themselves with gold) and novelties such as the gunpowder helped to intimidate their opponents. Moctezuma was killed, probably by his own people, but fierce resistance continued under his successor Cuauhtémoc until Tenochtitlan finally fell to Spanish control on 13 August 1521.



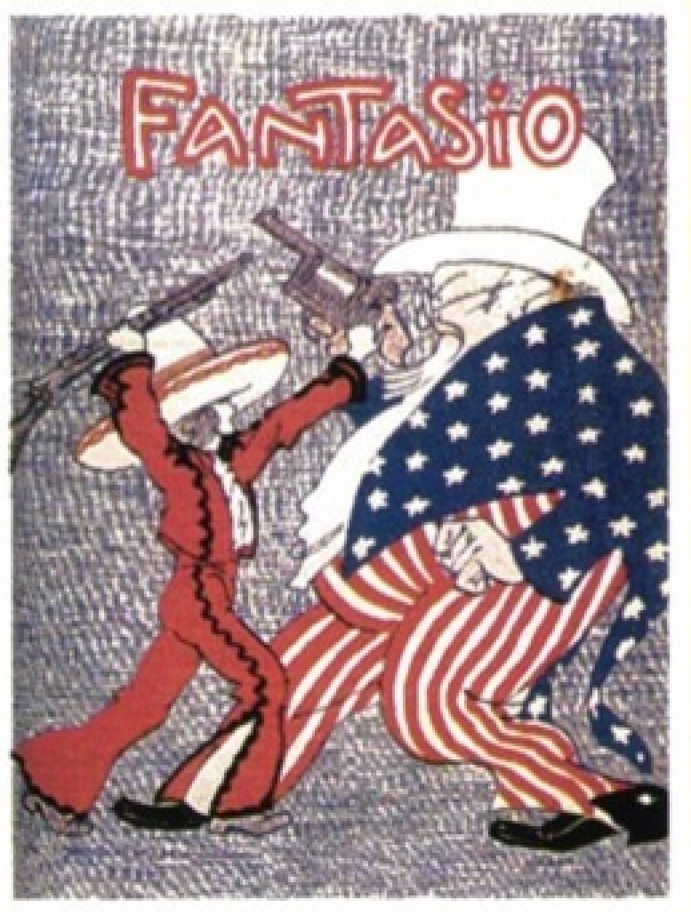
ILLUSTRATIONS CENTRE: DIEGO RIVERA / MUSEO DE LAS BELLAS ARTES, MEXICO CITY; TOP LEFT: DAVID RANSOM; ALL OTHERS MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY.



5 COLONY

Quickly the Spanish monarchy established control over what it called *Nueva España* (New Spain) and ruled for 300 years through a series of viceroys. The total population of Mexico fell from an estimated 25 million at the time of the Conquest to just six million at the start of the nineteenth century, of which no more than half were indigenous peoples. Many thousands were massacred by the Spanish, but most fell victim to European diseases against which they had no immunity. The Catholic Church enforced mass conversions and became the most powerful and wealthy institution in the colony. Annual convoys of galleons carried silver and gold as tribute to the Spanish crown. Only *gachupines*, Spaniards from Spain, could hold high office: *criollos* (Creoles, born in Mexico of Spanish blood) and *mestizos* (of mixed race) were relegated to positions of inferior status while the indigenous peoples were treated as slaves.

6 INDEPENDENCE



The French Revolution and the American Wars of Independence coincided with a decline of Spanish power. A Creole priest, Miguel Hidalgo, raised the cry *'Mexicanos, Viva Mexico!'* on the steps of his parish church in Dolores on 16 September 1810, the date recognized today as marking Mexican independence. But throughout the nineteenth century no lasting settlement between competing factions and ideas was ever reached. General Santa Ana became president or dictator on no less than 11 separate occasions. Mexico was prey to foreign powers. In 1845 the US annexed Texas and in 1848 invaded Mexico City; it paid $15 million for most of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. France temporarily invaded Veracruz in 1838 and in 1861 Napoleon III took Mexico City where he installed a Hapsburg archduke, Maximilian, as 'emperor' for a brief period. Benito Juárez, a Zapotec Indian and the only indigenous person ever to be president of Mexico, enacted reforms in 1867 aimed at reducing the power and wealth of the Catholic Church: church property was confiscated, marriages and burials became secular ceremonies and priests were forbidden to wear their robes in public.

7 REVOLUTION

Porfirio Díaz, a general, took power in 1876 and retained it as a virtual dictator until 1911. He enforced a policy of ruthless industrial 'modernization'. Almost all of it was, however, controlled by foreign investors. In the countryside the power of large landowners was vastly enhanced. In 1910 Francisco Madero stood against Díaz in the presidential election and was imprisoned, but he escaped to Texas where he called for Mexicans to rise up against Díaz. Armed revolutionary groups emerged, led by Pancho Villa and Pascual Orozco in the north and Emiliano Zapata in the south. Land for the peasantry, and the slogan *Tierra y Libertad* ('Land and Liberty'), were at the centre of revolutionary demands. In 1917 a congress established a new constitution containing most of the revolutionary agenda (a mandatory eight-hour day, national ownership of mineral rights, the distribution of land to the peasantry) which remains the basis of the Mexican Constitution today.

8 INSTITUTION

Relatively minor disturbances continued throughout much of the 1920s; halting progress was made on the revolutionary agenda, and when President Obregon was forced to stand down for breaching the 'no re-election' clause of the constitution in 1928 the long rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) effectively began. Lázaro Cárdenas was elected president in 1934 and he gave new pace to the distribution of land and nationalized the Mexican oil industry. Four decades of astonishing industrial growth followed a model of 'corporatist' intervention at every level of Mexican society. Despite Mexico's oil wealth, this model collapsed under a mountain of debt in 1982.

US BORDER PATROL

ALEX WEBB / MAGNUM

Bad **dreams** and cold **showers**

The journey ends back at the US-Mexican border – a border not just between two countries but between two different worlds, North and South.

A FEW hundred kilometres to the north of El Paso, in New Mexico, is the Los Alamos National Laboratory. This is where the nuclear age was conceived in the 1940s. It still has a five-billion-dollar budget and a there's a tourist brochure to match, which describes the Laboratory's purpose as 'to ensure our national security in today's new world order'. The nearby Trinity Site is where the first nuclear explosion took place. White Sands missile range runs from here through hundreds of square kilometres of desert down to Bliss military base in El Paso, which is 'home' to the Patriot missile. The nuclear age still hangs like the memory of a deeply dispiriting nightmare over this part of the US on the border with Mexico.

The same basic apprehensions about US national security are now building the Tortilla Curtain. In October 1993 the US authorities began Operation Blockade in El Paso. At precisely the point near Anapra where I had crossed into the US, 400 agents stationed themselves at intervals of less than 200 yards along the border to stop Mexicans from doing their shopping in the El Paso mall.

When it's easier for a jacuzzi or a packet of potato chips to cross a border than it is for a person, common sense suggests a momentary pause to enquire whether this comparison is entirely flattering to people, and what might be done to restore some semblance of sanity to the situation. Ask yourself what it would take to get the bulldozers in to demolish rather than construct the Tortilla Curtain and you would have, I reckon, a rough outline of the real issues between Mexico and the US – and between North and South as a whole.

The global economy is pretty good at looking after its own best interests. Trade barriers between Mexico and the US came down before NAFTA was even mentioned. Jobs that were liable to move from the US to Mexico have mostly gone there already. Vast quantities of money swill electronically around the world without any restraint whatever, causing far more economic disruption and job losses than the trade in goods. NAFTA is more about making Mexico a safe place for US capital than it is about free trade.

The rest of us have precious little influence over the global economy, though our lives are deeply affected by it. If there is any point at all to democratic government it is, surely, to redress the balance in our favour. That is what democratic governments should be discussing together with great urgency. Yet most choose to act like expensive public-relations agents for the global economy, claiming they are powerless to affect it one way or the other.

The Mexican Government is no exception. It appears to believe, for example, that by encouraging Mexico to resemble the US more closely, by joining the North and wiping the dust of the South off its feet, it can reduce the incentive for Mexicans to cross the US border in pursuit of the American Dream.

But there is a fundamental flaw in this reasoning. 'Structural adjustment' is part of the deal, the very foundation on which government policy was built after the debt crisis exploded in 1982. It is also digging an ever-deeper gulf between rich and poor in Mexico itself. When wages were cut and unemployment soared after 1982 even the downside of the American Dream on the streets of San Diego or Chicago must have seemed attractive to millions of virtually destitute Mexicans. Six million rural workers are simply surplus to the requirements of 'structural adjusted' Mexican agriculture.

This is the essential paradox. The global economy, left to its own devices, generates enormous wealth and poverty at the same time. A higher wall, a deeper gulf grows between the two everywhere, within the North as well as between North and South. Everyone dreams of being on the right side of it, whether on the New York Stock Exchange or by clambering over the Tortilla Curtain. No-one dares pause to contemplate the terrible consequences of the impoverishment they hope to leave behind. The result is unstable and unsustainable because we have a fragile environment and because there are more people on the wrong than the right side of the wall.

Linda Lynch, an El Paso artist who loves the Chihuahua desert with a fierce passion, told me a simple story. She was in Ciudad Juárez for a meal with friends on the same night I crossed back into El Paso.

'On the street I ran into a woman who works in a very, very wealthy family home here in El Paso,' she said. 'I have been a guest at their home for dinner recently, and I was talking to her in the kitchen for a while. And then I walk into Juárez and there she is. And I realized the disparity, as simple as could be, between the fact that she lives there and comes here to work in these two-thousand-square-foot houses with a couple of other people. It's nothing new. The world has always been run this way. But at what point does a new generation say: "It's time for a rethink"?'

Her passion for the desert has led her, reluctantly, to give up a great deal of her time and energy to opposing the forces that are now, she believes, destroying it. There's a scheme, for example, to dump New York sewage in the part of the desert that inspires her work. Dozens of new projects are planned on both sides of the border – an already polluted region, in theory protected by an existing agreement between the US and Mexican governments – threatening the water table, air quality, the Rio Grande itself.

'You know what it makes you feel?' she says. 'It makes you not want to be close to anything or anyone, because you're afraid that you can't control what will happen. It is so painful to watch the process of losing the landscape that many, many times I wish I had never become so close to it.

'These are age-old, simple questions and I'm afraid in the end they come down to plain old good and bad. I've left many government meetings on these issues feeling like I've just met with the devil himself. You just get this feeling like you need to take a shower.'

Often the passion of Linda's words came back to me as I travelled through Mexico. Mexico is a passionate place and that passion comes, I think, not from hatred but from love: the Huichol's love for their land and culture; Samuel Ruiz's love for the indigenous people of his diocese; the coffee-growers' love for their *ejido*; the Mexico City shanty-dwellers' love for their

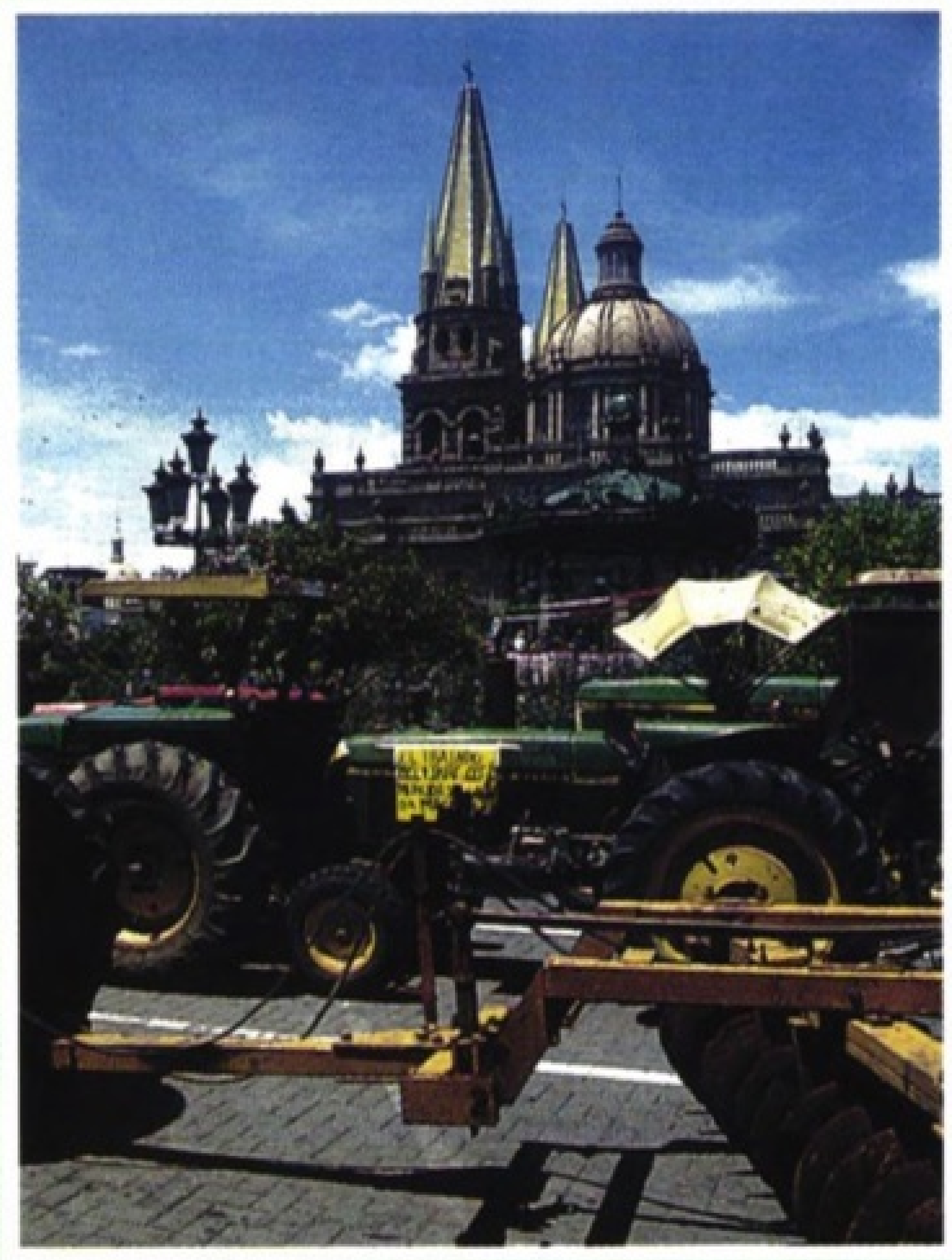
NAFTA, GATT and all that

'Free trade' agreements are in vogue throughout the Americas.

THE North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was proposed by Carlos Salinas, George Bush and Brian Mulroney at a meeting in San Antonio, Texas, in June 1991.

The Agreement is part of a series of North and South American 'free trade' agreements which began with the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between Canada and the US signed in 1988, followed by George Bush's 'Initiative for the Americas' announced in June 1990. In September 1991 Mexico and Chile initialed a new formal Agreement on Economic Co-operation.

These agreements run alongside the postponed completion of the world-wide 'Uruguay Round' of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). Both NAFTA and the 'Uruguay Round' were due to come into force on 1 January 1994.



Motorized anti-NAFTA protest Guadalajara.

DAVID RANSOM

NAFTA includes provisions for comprehensive trade liberalization and effective rules to remove 'distortions' of trade and resolve trade disputes. There were six broad areas of negotiation:

- ***Market access.*** Average tariff barriers in Canada, the US and Mexico are already 'low' and not a significant barrier to trade. However, Canada and the US maintain substantial barriers against textiles, beverages, transport equipment, food processing and agriculture, important areas for Mexico.
- ***Trade rules.*** Penalties and 'antidumping' duty laws will be imposed. Not much is expected to prevent such rules from being used as protectionist devices.
- ***Trade in services.*** A broad range of commercial services, including finance and transport, will be 'deregulated'. Transport services provided by the state are a contentious issue, as are other state services and social programmes such as public childcare, which the US interprets as a 'subsidy' to employers.
- ***Foreign investment.*** NAFTA will provide for 'national treatment' of foreign investment, removing local-content and performance requirements. Mexico still maintains restrictions, but wants to attract more foreign investment.
- ***Intellectual property.*** A contentious issue between North and South at GATT. In the NAFTA negotiations the US has placed strong pressure on Mexico to ensure that copyrights, patents and trade marks are bound to international agreements.
- ***Dispute settlement.*** Rules are already established in the US-Canada FTA. This area gave rise to sharp disagreements in the autumn of 1993 on 'national sovereignty' and the use of sanctions and fines.

NAFTA surfaced as an issue during the 1992 US presidential elections. President Clinton subsequently introduced bilateral US-Mexico 'side agreements' on the ***environment*** and ***labour*** into the negotiations. These focus on the 'pollution haven effect', whereby US polluters move to Mexico to avoid US environmental legislation; 'runaway jobs', when US employers shift operations to cheap-labour factories in Mexico; and the 'labour rights' issue arising from the restrictions on free trade unions in Mexico. Lacking the enforceable legal status of the Agreement itself, these 'side agreements' have been written off as too weak by many of the US lobbyists who originally raised them as concerns.

Thea Lee of the Economic Policy Institute in Washington comments: 'The fact is that the US is more important to Canada and Mexico than Canada and Mexico are to the US. Virtually all the important concessions have been made by Mexico.'

Source: OECD Economic Surveys 1991/2: **Mexico – Special survey of a non-member country**, Paris 1992.

RENÉ BURRI / MAGNUM

Love's labour's lost – deepening divisions between Mexicans.

Asamblea. You could pass away your entire life in the *maquiladoras* of Ciudad Juárez and feel nothing but suppressed tears.

What makes Mexico so special is that its people expect to be heard. By and large the years of revolutionary violence proved cathartic and creative for them. By and large indigenous peoples have fared better in Mexico than elsewhere in the Americas. So human-rights organizations can think beyond indignation towards broader issues of justice and equity. Trade unions can plan for an independent and active labour movement. Citizens can campaign for real democracy. Environmentalists can begin the repairs. Even the PRI can try to figure out where on earth it now stands after the somersault.

Mexico, for all that it was famously labelled 'the perfect dictatorship' by the Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa, is not an oppressive place in which to live. The PRI may not be impeccable democrats, but their record is better than most in Latin America and even in a perfect democracy many Mexicans might still wish to vote for them.

Mexico, of all countries in the world, cannot bury its head in the desert and pretend that Uncle Sam, the new world order and the global economy have simply gone away. Mexicans feel no less ambiguous about the benefits of a consumer society than anyone else. They have as much right to enjoy such benefits as there are. But the Mexicans I spoke to have aspirations of their own, and you can find no trace of them whatever in the negotiations over free trade and 'structural adjustment', nor in the souls of those who are pulling the strings. Where, for example, is there even a passing reference to the benefits of *fair* trade?

In the North, opponents of NAFTA had in their midst the maverick figure of Ross Perot, playing on racist anti-Mexican sentiment and requisitioning the opposition to help fill the gaps in the Tortilla Curtain. There was an understandable reluctance among other more progressive opponents of NAFTA I met in the US and Canada to oppose the racist undertones of the campaign, or to give hostages to fortune and spell out a different strategy. Now that NAFTA has been approved by the US Congress such a strategy has become an urgent priority, though the chance to advocate it effectively may not return for some time.

The bare bones of 'a just and sustainable development initiative for North America' are beginning to circulate and I saw several rough drafts of one while I was in the US. But I waited in vain for progressive opinion to express any enthusiasm at all for closer ties with Mexico. No-one was prepared to say 'Welcome aboard!', or to suggest that the US might actually have something to *gain* from Mexico. I had the impression of a place and a people condemned to fear forever that they may have more to lose than to gain from change.

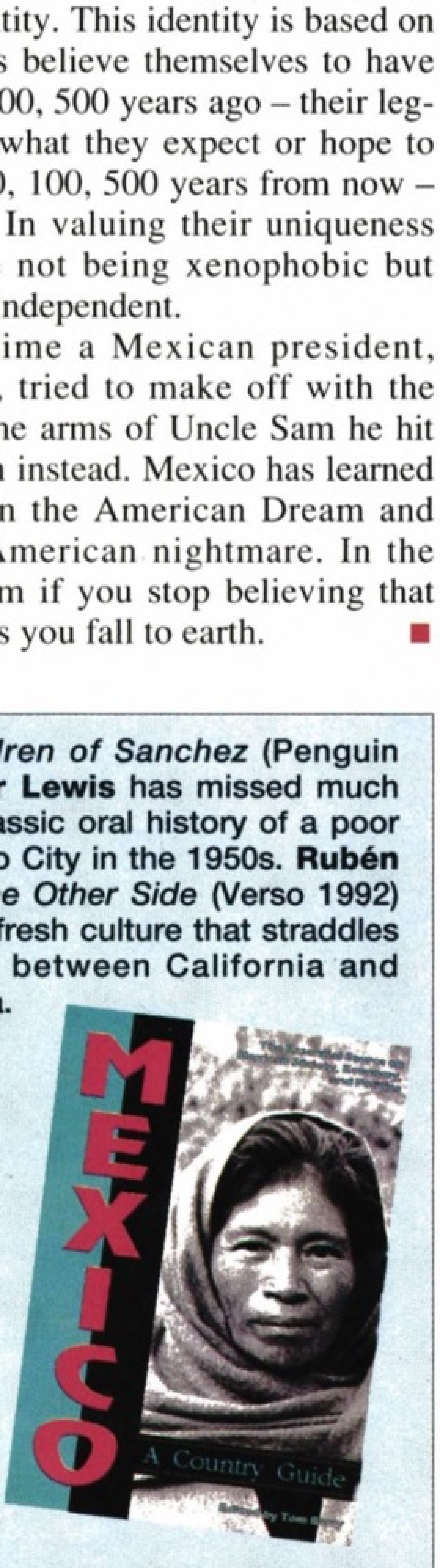
Across the border the picture is, I think, more encouraging. The Mexican Action Network Against Free Trade (RMALC) brings together over 100 organizations across the whole spectrum of independent groups now flourishing in the country. They are not, in fact, invariably opposed to free trade or to closer links with the US – merely to the deals currently being done. These deals do not reflect their own priorities and in some cases (labour legislation, the environment, agricultural reform) are in direct conflict with them.

What is wrong with NAFTA is not just the narrow bleakness of its vision but the way it violates Mexicans' perceptions of their own identity. This identity is based on how Mexicans believe themselves to have been 10, 50, 100, 500 years ago – their legends; and on what they expect or hope to become 10, 50, 100, 500 years from now – their dreams. In valuing their uniqueness Mexicans are not being xenophobic but dignified and independent.

The last time a Mexican president, Porfirio Díaz, tried to make off with the country into the arms of Uncle Sam he hit the Revolution instead. Mexico has learned to fly between the American Dream and the Central American nightmare. In the Mexican dream if you stop believing that you can do this you fall to earth. ■

ALSO WORTH READING ON MEXICO

For factual analysis by far the best first stop is **Tom Barry's** *Mexico, a Country Guide*, (Resource Center, Albuquerque, 1992). You need look no further if you want to take an interest in Mexican society a bit deeper. Almost everything imaginable is covered in great detail, and there are strong sections on women's and social movements. From the same publisher comes *Runaway America* by **Harry Browne** and **Beth Sims**, which disentangles what's really happening to jobs across the US/Mexico border and outlines a radical alternative agenda for jobs. A sharp documentary account can be found in *On the Line: Life on the US-Mexican Border* by **Augusta Dwyer** (Latin America Bureau, London, forthcoming, Spring 1994). I may have missed it, but I reckon the great history of Mexico in English has still to be produced: you could do worse than refer to *Distant Neighbours* (Vintage 1987) by **Alan Riding** (published as *Inside the Volcano* by IB Tauris in the UK) for some crisp comment by a foreign correspondent who got to know Mexico well. Lamentably few Mexican writers of fiction have been translated into English but **Carlos Fuentes** is always a good read, if sometimes a little obscure and rarefied. His most recent is *Christopher Unborn* (Picador 1989). From foreign writers of fiction, do try the wonderful 'jungle' books – written before and during the Revolution – of **B Traven**, whose identity remained a mystery even when *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* was made into what remains one of my favourite movies. Most of his novels and short stories now seem to be out of print, but a trip to the library would be well rewarded. Anyone who has not read *The Children of Sanchez* (Penguin 1964) by **Oscar Lewis** has missed much more than a classic oral history of a poor family in Mexico City in the 1950s. **Rubén Martínez** in *The Other Side* (Verso 1992) writes out of a fresh culture that straddles the fault lines between California and Central America.



CAMBODIA

JOHN SPAULL / PANOS

Prayers for peace during the elections in Cambodia.

Year Zero not yet

Slow progress to peace

FOLLOWING UN-supervised elections in May 1993, halting progress has been made towards peace in Cambodia. The nightmare of a return to power by the Khmer Rouge has so far been averted. But major issues remain to be resolved.

Despite much intimidation 90 per cent of the population voted in the elections. The result created a delicate balance between competing forces of the former Phnom Penh government (Cambodia People's Party) and the coalition headed by Prince Sihanouk (Funcinpec). In the 120-seat Assembly 58 members are supporters of Funcinpec, 51 of the Cambodia People's Party, 10 Buddhist Democratic Liberation Party and one other. A new constitution was approved with overwhelming parliamentary support on 24 September. Sihanouk became a constitutional monarch and a new coalition government was formally installed.

The International Committee for the Reconstruction of Cambodia met in Paris on 10 September and increased development aid to $1 billion. It is, however, attached to a neo-liberal economic programme with which the new government must comply. Much of the $800 million previously agreed was never disbursed.

Some extra funds were pledged for removing mines but resources to deal with between eight and ten million mines that still litter the country remain scarce. One worker with an aid agency commented: 'The cost of funding the Cambodia Mine Action Centre for one year with a full complement of expatriate technical staff is $12 million – the cost of one military helicopter or 600 Landcruisers.' But funding for the Mine Action Centre remains problematic. Meanwhile the terrible toll from the mines continues to mount: between 200 and 300 people were maimed by them in September alone.

Cambodian human-rights groups are now more firmly established. One such group, Ponleau Khmer, tried to open up the secretive debate around the new constitution, and meetings were arranged across the country. A UN human-rights office has been established in Phnom Penh. Cory Aquino, the former president of the Philippines, has been appointed the UN Secretary General's special representative in Cambodia despite her chequered record on human rights when she was in power.

Little progress has been made on bringing the leadership of the Khmer Rouge to book for genocide. They have, for the moment, fallen silent. Some Khmer Rouge forces have defected. But the threat of their return, or of continued violence, remains so long as they are able to retreat at will across the border with Thailand. There is some suggestion that the genocide question is an internal one for Cambodia to settle. But there are also international legal responsibilities which can only be discharged by the UN.

International campaigning – of which the April 1993 issue of the **NI** was a part – contributed to peace in Cambodia, but there is still a long way to go. The pressure on governments needs to be kept up if Cambodia is to avert a slide back to Year Zero. ■

Paul Donovan

No go Jacques

France has flatly rejected a South Pacific Forum proposal to send a United Nations decolonization inspection team to the French territory of New Caledonia. French presidential special ambassador to the South Pacific, Jacques Le Blanc, says such a proposal is simply 'not reasonable' under the Matignon Accords, designed to take New Caledonia to a referendum on self-determination in 1998. France has not responded to requests to provide regular reports to the UN Committee of 24, nor to calls from the Kanak independence movement for talks to define the terms and conditions of the 1998 referendum.

Pacific News Bulletin, vol 8, no 8.

Home grown change

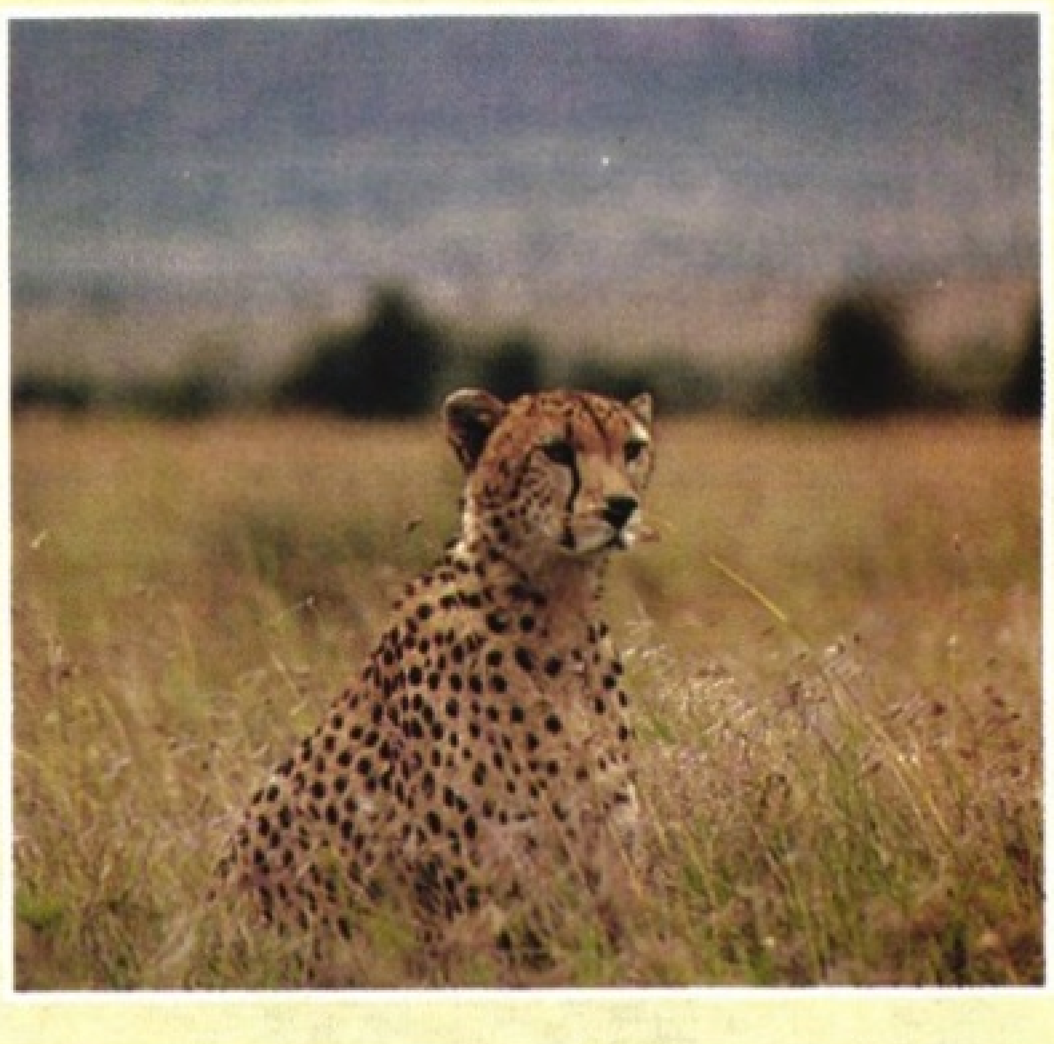
A small group of Santa Ana Native Americans in New Mexico has revitalized itself by returning to sustainable farming. Faced with agricultural decline, the tribe adopted a plan in the mid-1980s to revive organic and environmentally sound methods. Their first big success has been growing organic blue corn which, ironically, is used in a sophisticated line of internationally marketed cosmetics. The Ford Foundation found the Santa Ana Indians had demonstrated 'an extraordinary, integrated communal vision'. Their next venture will be a retail shop to sell natural fertilizers.

Consumer Currents, no 158.

Shylock manoeuvres

Tanzanian wildlife lovers are enraged that United Arab Emirates defence minister Mohammed Abdul Rahim al-Ali was given an exclusive shooting-rights lease for 10 years in a 4,000 square-kilometre area bordering on the world famous Serengeti National Park. Said one Tanzanian hunting expert: 'In the history of this country, we have never seen anything like it before – 70 hunters toting semi-automatic weapons'. But the Government pleads: 'General al-Ali and his party have in two years of their hunting expeditions given $500,000 to the Tanzanian department of wildlife'.

Down To Earth, vol 2 no 7.

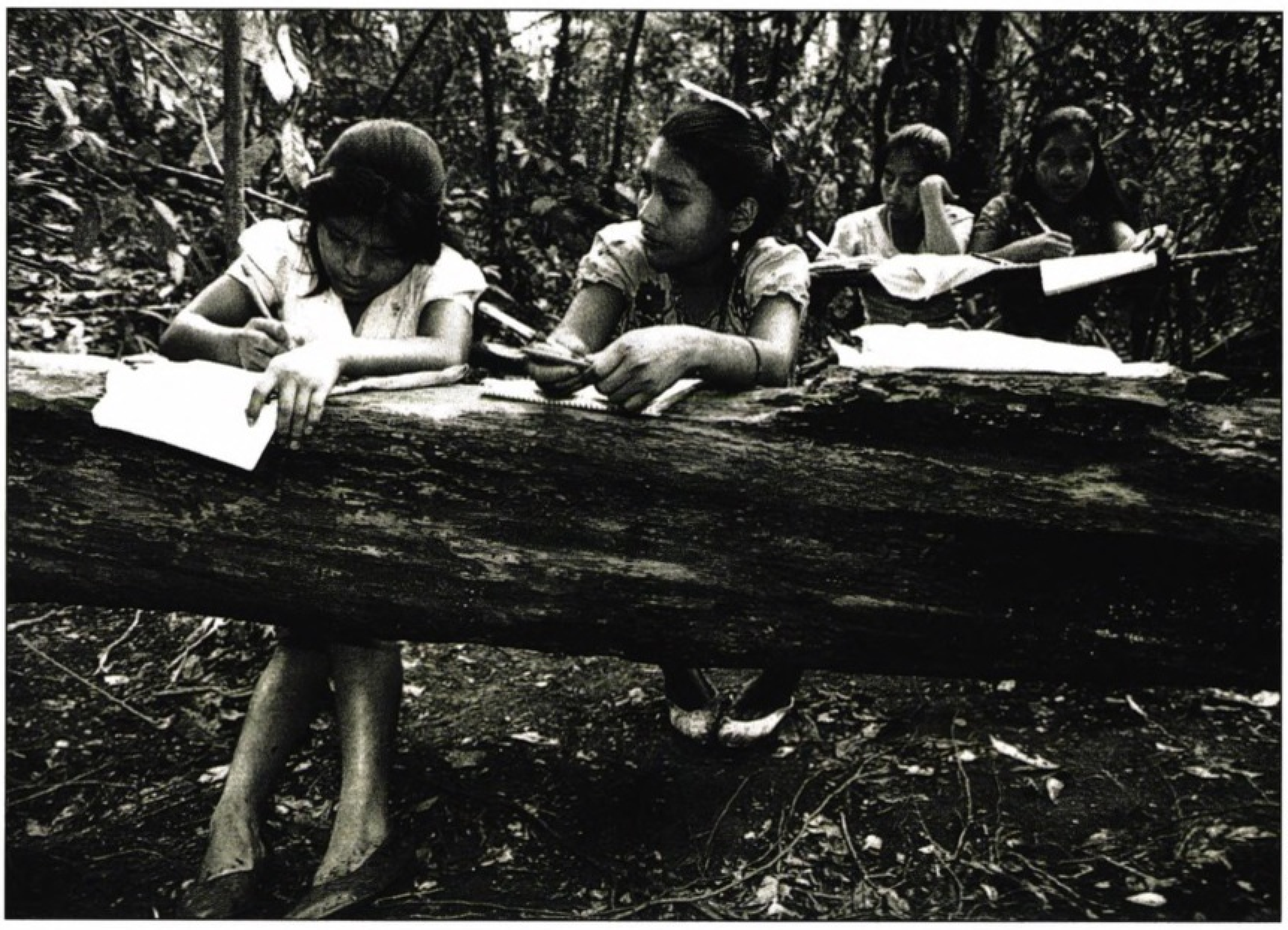


PENNY TWEEDIE / PANOS

EDUCATION

Learning resistance

Agricultural co-operatives in Guatemala dodge the Army's offensive



PAUL SMITH

Humane education: resting on trees, the children take their lessons in the forest.

SEATED at roughly made desks of branches bound together with vine, a group of Guatemalan children watch their teacher write words on a canvas blackboard. *Hielo. Líquido. Vapor.* They are learning about the physical states of water (Ice. Liquid. Vapour.) and its importance to life. Nearby in another jungle clearing a teacher slowly dictates – *'frijole... fruta... fuego... fusil... futuro'* (beans, fruit, fire, rifle, future). The words are so relevant to the lives of the boys copying them down that it isn't just coincidence they're in the spelling test.

The children belong to the self-named *Comunidades de Población en Resistencia.* Their parents are unarmed *campesinos* who are cultivators of maize and beans yet are constantly forced to flee their communities. For the past 12 years they have been targeted by a succession of military offensives. Following a massacre of 324 people in a marketplace by the Army in 1982, the communities of the northern jungle region of Guatemala, the Ixcan, have been on alert.

Under suspicion of being guerilla sympathizers or even guerillas themselves – because of their geographical proximity to the left-wing insurgent movement – the Army wants to drive them from their homelands into neighbouring Mexico. Their refusal to accept the installation of Civil Defence Patrols – vigilante defence units armed and directed by the Army which would have effectively militarized the region – is another bone of contention.

'Since 1982 the Army has burnt down the school every year along with the rest of the community,' explained Felix Perez, a teacher who like the four other teachers here never completed his own schooling, having to abandon it to work in the fields at the age of 13. 'Our struggle is not only to teach the children to read and write but to give them a more humane education to ensure they do not grow up to be vicious people like those who force us from our communities.'

Felix lives in Los Angeles, one of the settlements in the Ixcan which were formed in the 1960s after land was earmarked for poor, landless *campesinos* to set up agricultural co-operatives. They are still true co-operatives: teachers, agricultural workers and vigilantes, who are posted to warn of the Army's approach, all serve the community and receive food according to their needs. Even the children contribute to the workload when the need arises.

'The Army burns our crops and houses but we always return,' explains Emile Xejil from Cuarto Pueblo where the 1982 massacre took place. 'They want to destroy us so they can move in people who would be under their control and have civil patrols. This recent offensive has stopped us clearing land and sowing this year's crop. We hide our crops in the jungle and have fields of maize and beans far from our communities where the Army won't find them so easily. But all the same we will have to endure hunger this year.'

In the jungle near Los Angeles the children's classes finish for the day after only a few hours. Those who can make it must now walk to the river bank, some two hours away, to help carry the banana crop. A few days earlier word had been received that one of their hidden silos had been burnt by the Army. The children must wait until it is safe to return to their community to discover if their school is still standing.

But the will to study is strong in their hearts and minds, just as their community is determined not to abandon the land that sustains them. Their slogan says it all: *resistir para vivir* – resist to live. ■

Paul Smith

Texaco boycott

For 20 years Texaco took oil - and profits - out of Ecuador. Texaco drilled hundreds of wells and built 300 miles of roads through the Amazon, destroying thousands of hectares of rainforest. Then, in 1992, Texaco pulled out of Ecuador, leaving uncovered waste that seeped into the subsoil. Indigenous and environmental groups in the *Amazonia por la Vida* ('Amazonia for Life') coalition say that Ecuador must find alternative sources of energy to avoid further pollution. They have called for an international boycott of Texaco until it cleans up the damage it has caused in the region.

World Press Review, vol 40, no 8.

TAYACAN / PANOS

THE GULF

Shroud ban

Trade sanctions against Iraq scrape the barrel

UNITED Nations Resolution 687 established comprehensive trade sanctions against Iraq after the Gulf War but exempted medical and humanitarian aid. In practice, however, the Resolution is being used as a form of indiscriminate punishment against the Iraqi people. Over 100,000 people – mainly children under five, the elderly and those in need of long-term medical care such as diabetics and cancer patients – are now estimated to be dying each year as a direct result.

An Iraqi-born, British-based entrepreneur whose brother and 18-month-old nephew were killed by the US bombing of Baghdad last June, has revealed just how cruel and petty the sanctions can be. Kais al-Kaisy runs a company that exports medical and allied supplies worldwide. He's been trying for months to supply burial shroud materials to a Baghdad wholesaler.

The battle to send the material, which costs less than 50 US cents a metre, began in April 1993. On 6 May the UK Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) granted a licence permitting him to 'enter into negotiations for the supply of shroud cloth to Iraq'.

In early June the DTI allowed shipment to Aqaba, Jordan, 'for ultimate shipment to Iraq'. But there was a catch. A letter from the UN Sanctions Committee was needed to approve the onward shipment. And a further payment of $500 per container was required to pay for the inspection by the UN.

By September, despite endless correspondence, no clearance had come from the UN. The final blow landed with a letter from the DTI on 23 September informing al-Kaisy that 'all individual export licences are revoked with effect from 28 September 1993'. The letter simply stated that 'a replacement export or supply licence' was needed, and the whole tortuous process started again.

Al-Kaisy struggled for words as he said: 'This material could be used for nothing but dressing the dead. It is recognized for what it is – it could not be used for clothes or curtains, it is shroud material. We do not bury people in smart clothes, shining shoes. We have no funeral parlours. We wash them, tend them, buy six or seven metres of shroud material from a textile shop and put them in the ground, wrapped, cleansed and mourned.' ■

Felicity Arbuthnot

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Out with a squeak

Chinese experts are searching for clues to a dramatic mass mouse suicide after hundreds of thousands of rodents known as 'big-eyed devils' apparently killed themselves in the country's far western grasslands. According to Xinhua news agency, 'the mice crawled slowly and looked dull and dumb before committing suicide. In some cases large groups of mice drowned themselves together, plunging into rivers or lakes.' Chinese experts think it may be a 'normal ecological phenomenon' resulting from a sharp rise in the mouse population. Locals, however, fear that the mouse deaths may be a premonition of a violent earthquake.

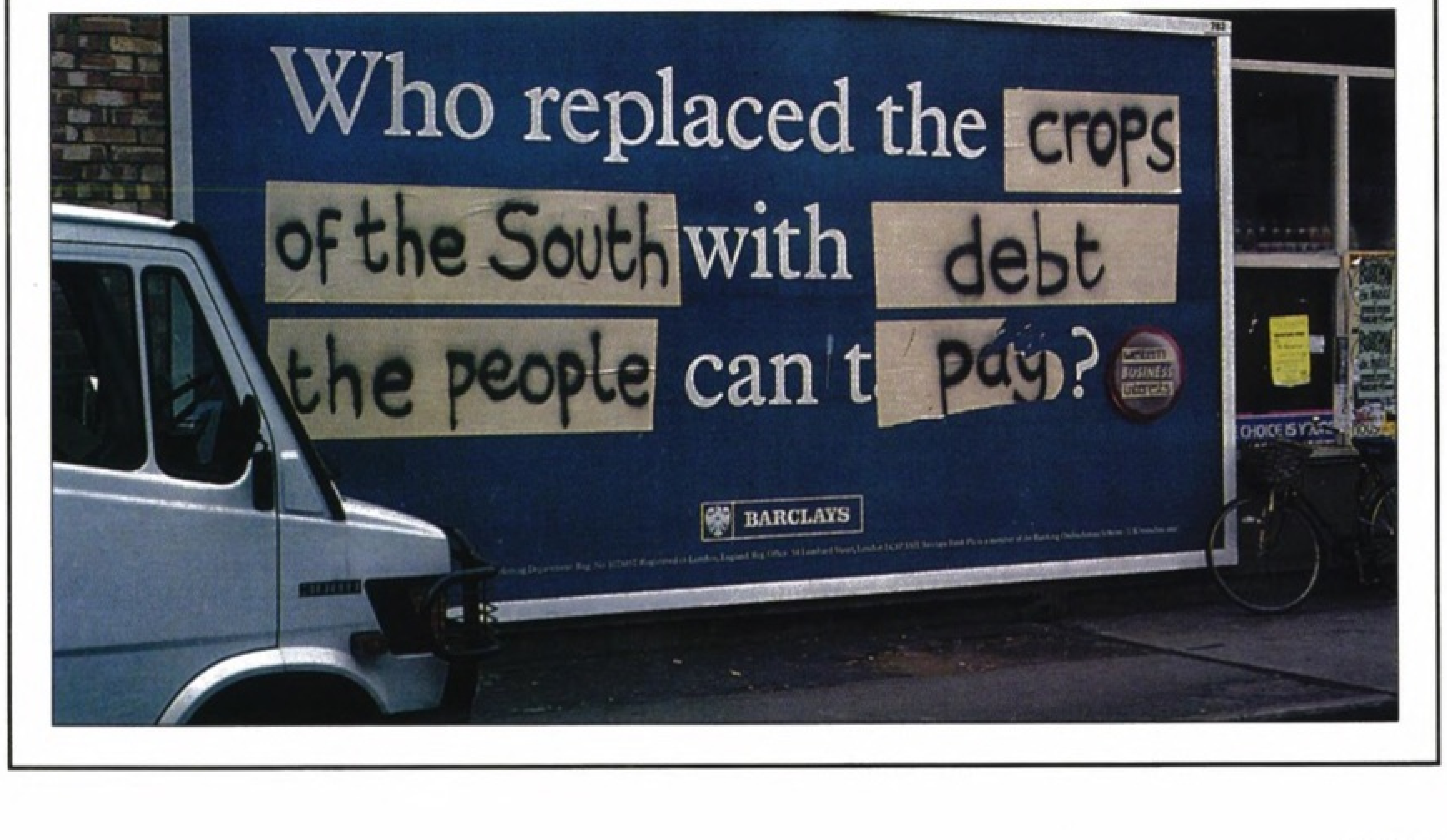
Consumer Currents, no 158.

Dirty business

A government decree issued in Indonesia in 1992 banned plastic waste imports. Since then more than 5,000 tons of waste have been illegally imported from America, Europe, Japan and Australia under the guise of wealthy countries' recycling programmes. Only 60 per cent of the imported waste is recyclable: of the remainder at least 10 per cent is toxic or hazardous. The incomes of 200,000 local scavengers have plummeted by 50 to 75 per cent since Indonesia began to import waste in 1988. The irony is that scavengers provide Indonesian cities with free recycling services which keep the environment clean and save the cities millions of dollars annually in waste disposal costs. Indonesian NGOs and scavenger communities are stepping up their efforts to re-export waste to its country of origin and to put an end to the waste trade in Indonesia.

Link FoE International, no 56.

Change a few words and you get a different meaning: a billboard on an Oxford street has been deftly adapted to highlight the continuing role of the banks that bleed the South dry with debt repayments. The UK bank, Barclays, is one of the largest.



ALAN HUGHES

END

END Quote

All books about all revolutions begin with a chapter that describes the decay of tottering authority or the misery and sufferings of the people. They should begin with a psychological chapter – one that shows how a harassed, terrified man [sic] suddenly breaks his terror and stops being afraid. This unusual process – sometimes accomplished in an instant, like a shock – demands to be illustrated. Man gets rid of fear and feels free. Without that, there would be no revolution.

Ryszard Kapuscinski, Polish journalist

METRO TARTAN

Balanced characters under gritty scrutiny.

film

Friends

directed by **Elaine Proctor**

Two years ago South African director Elaine Proctor won acclaim – and a British Film Institute award – for her short film *On the Wire*. This bleak and claustrophobic chamber piece traced the breakdown of the marriage between an Afrikaner soldier and his wife after the terrible revelations about his work activities.

Friends is her first full-length feature. Set in Johannesburg and spanning the decade up to the release of Mandela, it tells the story of three women who share a house together. The friends represent different strands of South African life. Sophie (Kerry Fox) is the white upper-class girl who rebels against her privileged background by joining a militant organization; Aninka (Michele Burgers) is a mild-mannered Afrikaner who buries her head in her archaeological research, while Thoko (Dambisa Kente) is a teacher in the black townships. The testing point for the women comes when Sophie's political affiliations lead her to plant a bomb at Jan Smuts Airport, causing the deaths of a soldier and a cleaner. Sophie begins to fall apart, distancing herself from the friends with whom she cannot share her secret.

Proctor may be forgiven for choosing such an obviously balanced group of characters around which to structure her drama. Perhaps she feels that she has to justify the story to everyone – which may be a burden that progressive South African filmmakers who have access to funding (**Friends** is an Anglo-French co-production) carry at the moment. And the film does seem to be more for an international than domestic audience since it spells out what must be explicit to those who live in the country. At the same time it obscures such important things as, for instance, what motivates Sophie, offering the most obvious of explanations: as a child she witnessed her family's black maid, with whom she had a close bond, being dragged away by the police.

With so much taken on board the film loses out, having only a trace of the quiet control of *On the Wire*. That said, Proctor is a gifted filmmaker whose vision should be encouraged. The mood of **Friends** oscillates between the poetic and the documentary, with moments of intense symbolic meaning, and provides a gritty scrutiny of the fractured landscape which the characters inhabit.

Politics ☆☆☆☆☆
Entertainment ☆☆☆

books

Low intensity democracy

edited by **Barry Gills, Joel Rocamora** and **Richard Wilson**

(Pluto Press ISBN 00 7453 0536 9 pb)

The play on 'low intensity warfare' is apposite. This was the strategy adopted by US administrations during the 1980s to wage war against socialism in El Salvador and Nicaragua without making their own hands bloody. 'Low intensity democracy' has the same remote-control appeal. But it has the added attraction of incorporating that irresistible buzz word of the post-Cold War era: 'democracy'. What exactly is meant by this 'democracy' and whom it benefits is rarely asked.

The contributors to this book, who include such big names as Noam Chomsky, André Gunder Frank and Samir Amin, are refreshingly ready to ask that kind of question. Why, for example, has democratization in countries like Argentina and the Philippines been followed, after the initial euphoria, by a profound political apathy? And why, in so many cases, are people in their daily lives no more free and actually poorer than they were before?

With a good mix of political theory and specific country case studies, this book explains how low intensity democracy operates by reinforcing conservatism in the interests of local élites and international capital. Meanwhile, the rest of the world swallows the line that parties and elections equals democracy and that two members of rival élite families competing for power in the Guatemalan elections somehow marks a major shift away from dictatorship.

There are genuinely democratic forces in the world today – but you are not likely to find them in the political parties. Rather, they are to be found in the social movements – the women's, workers', peasants' and human-rights organizations. And their role is to destabilize the old order, not prop it up.

This is a provocative and timely book, clearly conceived, quite readable and definitely useful to anyone trying to make sense of the world today. But the bigger question remains unanswered: how can those genuinely democratic movements be heard above the monotonous, idiot bleating of proponents of the New World Order?

Politics ☆☆☆☆☆
Entertainment ☆☆

music

Born to Choose

by **Various Artists**

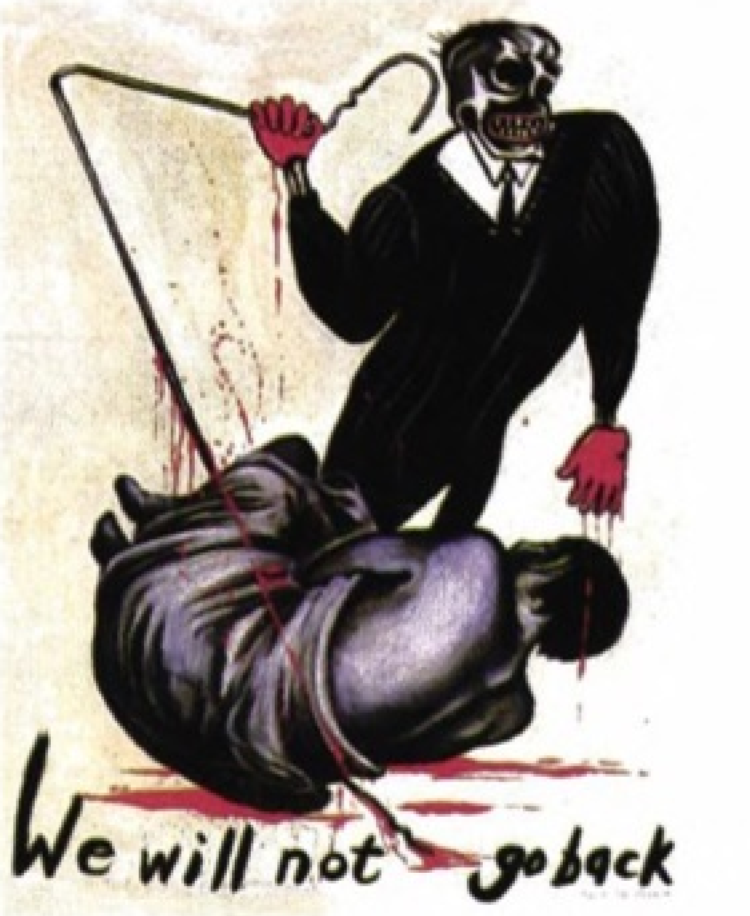
(Rykodisc RCD/RAC 10256)

'It's time to say something!' is the message of John Trudell's song *Rant and Roll* – and of this extraordinary album as a whole. **Born to Choose** is a 12-song compilation featuring rare unreleased tracks from the likes of REM with Natalie Merchant, Tom Waits and the Cowboy Junkies. They all deal with a woman's right to abortion and the proceeds from the album are earmarked for three pro-choice and women's health organizations.

Benefit albums are nothing new. The unique qualities of **Born to Choose** lie elsewhere.

There's the cause, for a start. As an excellent 20-page accompanying booklet makes clear, the battle for reproductive rights is far from won. In the US clinics are being firebombed by anti-choice campaigners, and 35 states prohibit abortion for under-18-year-olds.

Then there's the music – some of it great, the contributions of REM and The Cowboy Junkies, superlative. REM and Natalie Merchant's *Photograph* fuses a big guitar sound to the counterpoint between vocals; The Cowboy Junkies' *Lost my driving wheel* is full of mysterious curves while Jeff Bird's harmonica parts put the song into orbit. Matthew Sweet pops up with a version of Lennon and McCartney's *She said, she said*; and Tom Waits uses *Filipino fox spring hog* as a foil for his characteristic lurching blues. Sugar, Pavement, Helmet, NRBQ, Soundgarden and Lucinda Williams all make original contributions, while the sparky post-punk Mekons contribute **Born to Choose's** especially written title.


We will not go back

SUE COE

As veteran rock journalist Ellen Willis points out in her short essay, sex was always part of rock's rebelliousness while music itself has a history that's intertwined with the politics of liberation. And for a campaigning album, **Born to Choose** has a justifiably angry tenor.

Politics ☆☆☆☆☆
Entertainment ☆☆☆☆☆

STAR RATING

Excellent	☆☆☆☆☆
Very good	☆☆☆☆
Good	☆☆☆
Fair	☆☆
Poor	☆

Reviews editor: **Vanessa Baird**

films OF THE YEAR

It has been a good year for bringing the excluded and untold into the mainstream – or at least closer to it. The most obvious and successful example was **Malcolm X** directed by **Spike Lee.** While demolishing the white myth of Malcolm as a demagogue spreading race hatred, Lee avoided the opposite pitfall of mindless hero worship. And he managed to tell a gripping story too...

Another breakthrough was the documentary film **Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media.** Although rated the 'most important intellectual alive' the mainstream media have consistently excluded the tireless activist. This film is the product of five years' work by Canadian filmmakers Peter Wintonick and Mark Achbar and makes for compelling watching, whether you are new to Chomsky or an old hand.

*(Reviewed **NI 241** and **242**)*

music OF THE YEAR

This past year has thrown up recordings that possess a fascinating political agenda. **Bang** by **World Party** was an end-of-the-world record that you could dance to. Decca kicked off its new series of **Entartete Musik** – 'degenerate music' banned by the Nazis – with operas from Korngold and Krenek. But for sheer nerve and immediacy – and that's not even mentioning the music – nothing beats **Born to Choose,** a 12-tracker featuring **REM, Natalie Merchant, The Cowboy Junkies** and others. The album's beneficiary is pro-choice and women's health care. And the music? Sublime!

(Reviewed in this issue)

book OF THE YEAR

Combine the raciness of a thriller with an intelligent, inside story of what is happening in the most populous and yet secretive country in the world today and you have **Black Hands of Beijing.** This *tour de force* by **George Black** and **Robin Munro** was the book that this year brought the politics of China alive, and provided a miraculously readable story of the democracy movement over the 13 years leading up to Tiananmen. The battle for democracy is bound to be renewed pretty soon, as the ailing gerontocracy loosens its grip on the nation. Reading **Black Hands** will give you the best background to any news coming out of China this year.

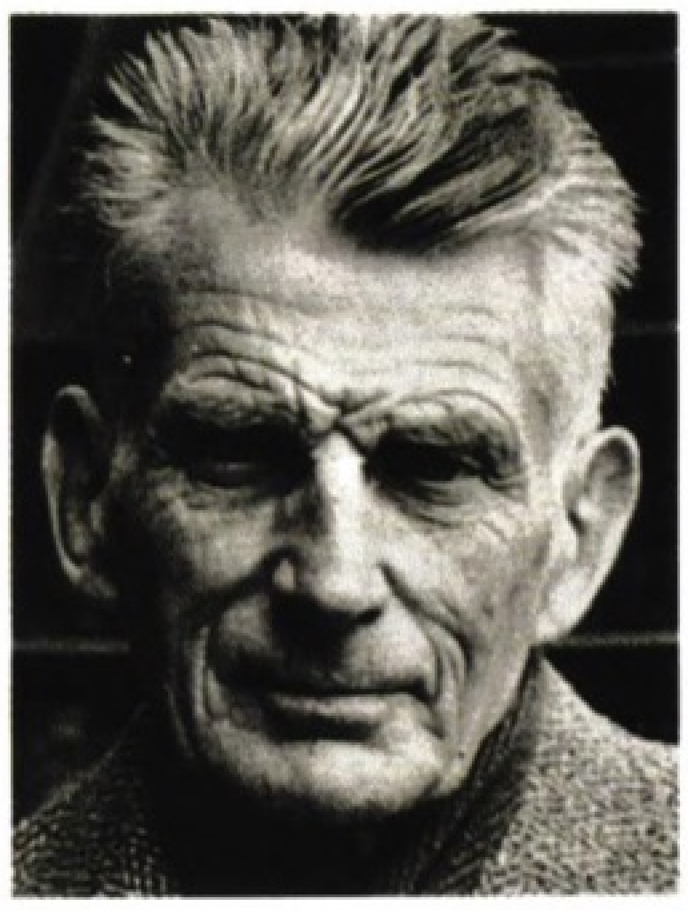
*(Reviewed in **NI 246**)*

THE *classic*

Waiting for Godot

... being the play in which nothing can be done.

'Waiting for Godot is like waiting for Clinton,' ran the headline quotation in the British *Guardian* newspaper last August. Susan Sontag, the New York writer, pictured amid the rubble of a besieged Sarajevo, had gone there to direct a Bosnian production of Samuel Beckett's well known drama. The story pricked my scepticism. Why was it that artistic activity in Bosnia was newsworthy only when a Western personality was involved? Wasn't there something odd and objectionable about Sontag directing actors, for parts spoken in a language she did not understand, through interpreters?



JERRY BAUER

'I can't think of a play as appropriate as *Godot*,' she was quoted as saying. 'It is about people who are weak and defenceless, abandoning hope of being saved by some arbitrary power.' Didn't that sound like the banal Americanization of an extreme social crisis? On the other hand, I reflected, wasn't Sontag saying precisely that art is not a mere consumerist luxury, but something that must address the political circumstances in which people find themselves? Wasn't her expression of solidarity in staging the play genuine, particularly in view of the personal danger for anyone in Sarajevo at the time?

The answers to some of these questions probably lie in **Waiting for Godot** itself, 'a tragicomedy in two acts' first produced in 1955. The play concerns Estragon and Vladimir, two rootless, occupationless but not entirely witless down-and-outs who discover (the first words of the play) 'nothing to be done'. We find them on a country road, on which the only feature is a naked tree. They have seemingly only one purpose in life: to wait for a character called Godot. They cannot move on until Godot comes. Each day brings fresh hope that Godot will arrive, but this hope is each day disappointed. They thus survive in a state of suspenseful, all-consuming anxiety, punctuated by resignation in the face of their absurd condition.

Estragon and Vladimir repeatedly propose parting from one another or committing suicide by hanging themselves from the tree, but they reflect that the tree may not bear the weight of the second body, and each desperately fears the prospect of being left alone. They grasp at any spectacle which offers relief from the situation, such as the appearances of the sadistic madman Pozzo, who drives with a whip an abject slave ironically called Lucky. 'That passed the time,' Vladimir comments when Pozzo and Lucky have gone, which is all that can apparently be hoped for in the absence of any meaning or enlightenment. 'Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!' exclaims Estragon, in what might be a description of the play itself.

The politics of this drama are far from self-evident. In the first place, the entire play is a clever joke played on its audiences, who wait in vain for 'something to happen' in the play much as the characters wait for Godot, only to find at the end that they have simply 'passed the time' viewing a spectacle. The usual attempt to 'beef up' **Waiting for Godot** into something more profound is to insist that it is an 'existential' parable about the absurdity of a world without God (it was, after all, written in Paris in the 1950s).

This is all very well, but like much existential writing, the play thus read encourages enormously conservative thinking: in a meaningless world, any purposive activity – politics especially – is ridiculous in the extreme. The more radical implications of a Godless world belong to socialist rather than existentialist thought: it is humans and only humans who make meaning; it is human interests and human activity in pursuit of those interests which create a sense of purpose in social life. Resignation and despair are only possible when a community renounces all prospect of relying on its own activity as a solution to its crises and dilemmas – in short, when it looks outside itself for salvation.

My problem with **Waiting for Godot** is that it seems to me to be ambiguously trapped between these conservative and radical positions. Beckett is as fascinated by dramatizing despair as he is aware of its utterly demoralizing power. My questions about Sontag's production of the play stemmed from a sense that she too was politically compromised and compromising. 'They feel humiliated by waiting,' she is quoted as saying of the citizens of Sarajevo. 'But they can only wait, hope or commit suicide. If that is not a description of the situation in Sarajevo, I know nothing.'

Despite the gravity of the situation in the city as she spoke, I remained deeply suspicious of the case for Western intervention which Sontag used Beckett's play to promote. She failed to note that the civil war in the former Yugoslavia was in part precipitated by the West, and that military intervention would later be used as an excuse for Big Brotherly activity in future imperialist scenarios. To place faith in the West, in such circumstances, is like hugging a viper.

One thing Sontag did, however, prove: art, even the seemingly 'empty' art of Beckett, dramatizes politics. The important thing is always to work out what kind of politics is being dramatized. ■

Macdonald Daly

***Waiting for Godot** by Samuel Beckett (Faber, 1956).*

QUESTIONS

...that have always intrigued you about the world will appear in this, your section, and be answered by other readers. Please address your answers and questions to 'Curiosities'.

The phrase 'the enemy within' was used by Margaret Thatcher to describe the miners during the British miners' strike in the mid-1980s. Was this phrase originated by her? If not, who was the first to use it?

It could come from the Bible. Matthew 10:36 reads: 'a man's foes shall be they in his own household' – a maxim tragically true throughout history, especially under totalitarians.

Rev Kenneth Brown
Paisley, Scotland, UK

Why are storks associated with childbirth?

According to Swedish legend, the stork received its name from flying around the cross of the crucified Christ crying *'Stryka! Stryka!'* (Strengthen, strengthen).

Given the later resurrection, and the belief in Christ as the giver of life, I assume that the stork therefore became linked with the creation of new life and hence the delivery of babies.

I hope this goes some way to solving the mystery but am willing to be proven wrong!

MG Cockcroft
Dundee, Scotland, UK.

In Christian belief it is the imaginative representation of the spirit – in the form of a bird – descending to earth at the moment of physical birth. We see a similar representation in the image of the dove, descending at the moment of baptism in Jordan and also in the story of the Holy Grail.

Stephen Hay
Wellington, Aotearoa/NZ

What is the origin of the term 'Pom'?

As your correspondents state in **NI 249** the commonly accepted view is that this is an acronym for 'Prisoners of England'. However, since the 'new' Australians were themselves the deported prisoners from Mother England that view is somewhat suspect.

It is far more likely that Pom stands for 'Possessors of Money' and indicates the anger felt by the emancipists – the ex-deportee prisoners who had gained their freedom and with their children were attempting to become landowners – against the land laws imposed by the British Government which gave financial benefits to immigrants to the detriment of the locally born.

C Fraser
Halifax, UK

Is cannibalism a racist myth?

To add to – and contradict some of – the answers given in **NI 248**, I have a traditionally carved Maori brain-box or *Kumete*. The description attached to the lid reads: 'When the chief of an opposing tribe was killed, his brain was taken and placed in the *Kumete*. Later, the victorious tribe assembled and the brain was distributed in very small portions to all present, who ate it as a sign of contempt to the defeated tribe, also to instil in them the valour of the defeated tribe.'

Len Clark
Uxbridge, UK

AWAITING YOUR ANSWERS

Why are Australians called 'diggers'?

C Fraser
Halifax, UK

I liked your *In bed with...*(NI 249) but thought that the first person to say, 'There is no such thing as society,' was Friedrich Hayek, not Margaret Thatcher. Can anyone confirm or deny this?

Janet Pearce
Uxbridge, UK

Is there an index on charity organizations which rates them according to political bias, bureaucracy, mismanagement, wastage, quality of information and the like?

Andrew Young
Edinburgh, Scotland, UK

Do cultures where characters are used instead of letters have an alphabet? And how do they use dictionaries?

Sarah Avison
Lutterworth, UK

I've read that men have periodical physical cycles, though without the visible symptoms of female cycles. Can anyone tell me more, recommend any books or articles on the subject, or suggest how I might be able to calculate my cycle?

Dinyar Godrej
Oxford, UK

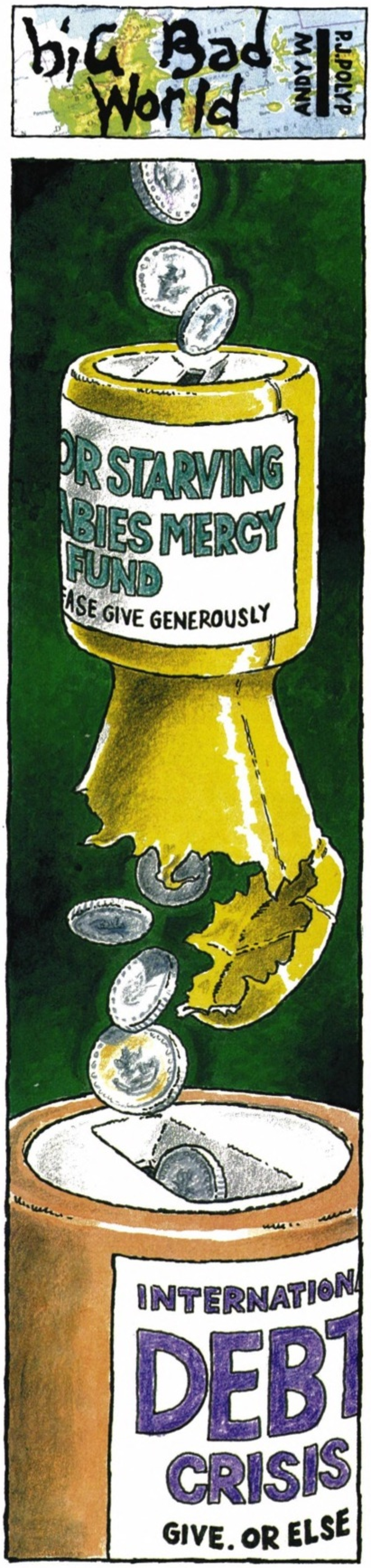
Which country or region of the world has been the most peaceful – free from both internal strife and involvement in external strife – during the past two centuries?

Diana Gibson
Ross-on-Wye, UK

What is the correct name for the aboriginal people of North America? At a recent conference on forest peoples I heard an objection to the use of the term 'Native American' from an aboriginal American who preferred to describe himself as 'Indian'.

I Crowston
Edmonton, Canada

If you have any questions or answers please send them to Curiosities, **New Internationalist, 55 Rectory Road, Oxford OX4 1BW, UK,** or to your local NI office (see inside front cover for addresses).



Why less means more

***Teeare Scarrott** reckons cars make you weak at the knees; there's more fun to be had from cultivating flowers and friendships.*

Most people know that a great deal of money is wasted on things we could well live without. Portents for the future suggest we're in for a prolonged period of belt-tightening until the world is living within its sustainable means. I say this not to spread gloom but to avoid it by adopting a lifestyle, in advance, which doesn't depend on earning a high income. If high incomes do persist, despite all the signs to the contrary, then you will be in the happy position of having money to burn. Living on just $60 a week is an excellent exercise in getting rid of unnecessary items.

First of all you don't have to have a house that is larger than your needs. The larger the house the more heating, cleaning, decoration, maintenance, furnishing and endless other costs there are. Most big houses are only for show anyway. If you're prepared to pay the price of showing off, fair enough. But for someone who hates cleaning and decorating, small is beautiful. And you can't count on a house being an investment these days – just the opposite.

Cars make you go weak at the knees from forgetting how to walk. Many people can't even manage to get out of their cars when they call by for someone – they would rather sit tight and beep their horns. Cars make people allergic to public transport which is more economical, causes less pollution and congestion, and is more sociable. Cars too are designed for show – what other point is there in high-performance models on roads with strict speed limits? They have encouraged a huge increase in crime. Socializing is far more relaxing when you don't have to worry about your car and, when you get used to using buses and taxis, much more fun.

The easiest contraption to live without is the refrigerator. Some parts of the world may be hot enough to justify its use, but in cool climates it serves little purpose other than to aid food and electricity marketing and encourage individual laziness. Refrigerator CFCs have punched a hole in the ozone layer. Meat, poultry and fish taste far better fresh than frozen and a few extra trips to the shops (more good exercise if the car has gone) leads to a far healthier diet than what you get from frozen junk foods. You are also less likely to be poisoned by salmonella.

Many labour-saving devices (emphasis on vices) such as power-driven lawnmowers (for lawns little bigger than postage stamps) and all manner of power-driven tools are pretty pointless if you then have to invest in an exercise bike.

Graveyard for refrigerators in Spain: resurrection not recommended.

ADRIAN EVANS / PANOS

I've lived without a washing machine for two years and I don't miss it one bit. A mother with several children may find hand washing tiresome but scrubbing and wringing is fine for an able-bodied man. Soaking clothes overnight does just as well as any machine, without causing wear and tear to your clothes.

Unfortunately, I may be forced to renew my telephone connection. Although I can live without it – and I am modest enough to admit that the world will not stop turning because I'm not at the other end of a telephone line – few people seem able or willing to write letters. Like so many other tortuous instruments of progress we have wrapped our lives round the telephone rather than the other way around. In the home its intrusive habits put paid to most moments of peace, but if you take it off the hook all and sundry start complaining. Not having a number has become as bad as the 'no fixed abode' tag. You cease to exist.

Being trendy or fashionable is perhaps the biggest waste of all. Some clothes would last a lifetime were it not for frivolous changes in fashion. I would prefer to make a cult of wearing vintage clothes, without going so far as to rip them on purpose. Much furniture too could last a lifetime were it not for ruthless marketing ploys. The best way to deal with all trends – and trendy people too – is to proudly go your own way.

By ignoring trends and fashions and doing away with superfluous gadgetry you will not only free yourself from enslavement to earning and spending – you may also become a more interesting person. Working long hours for doubtful benefits leaves no time to enjoy the simple pleasures like flowers and friendship, which cost little more than the time it takes to cultivate them.

By learning to live with as little money as possible you are freed from the woes of economic depression. It's a philosophy which hasn't become fashionable yet but, unlike most fashions, one that lasts a lifetime. ■

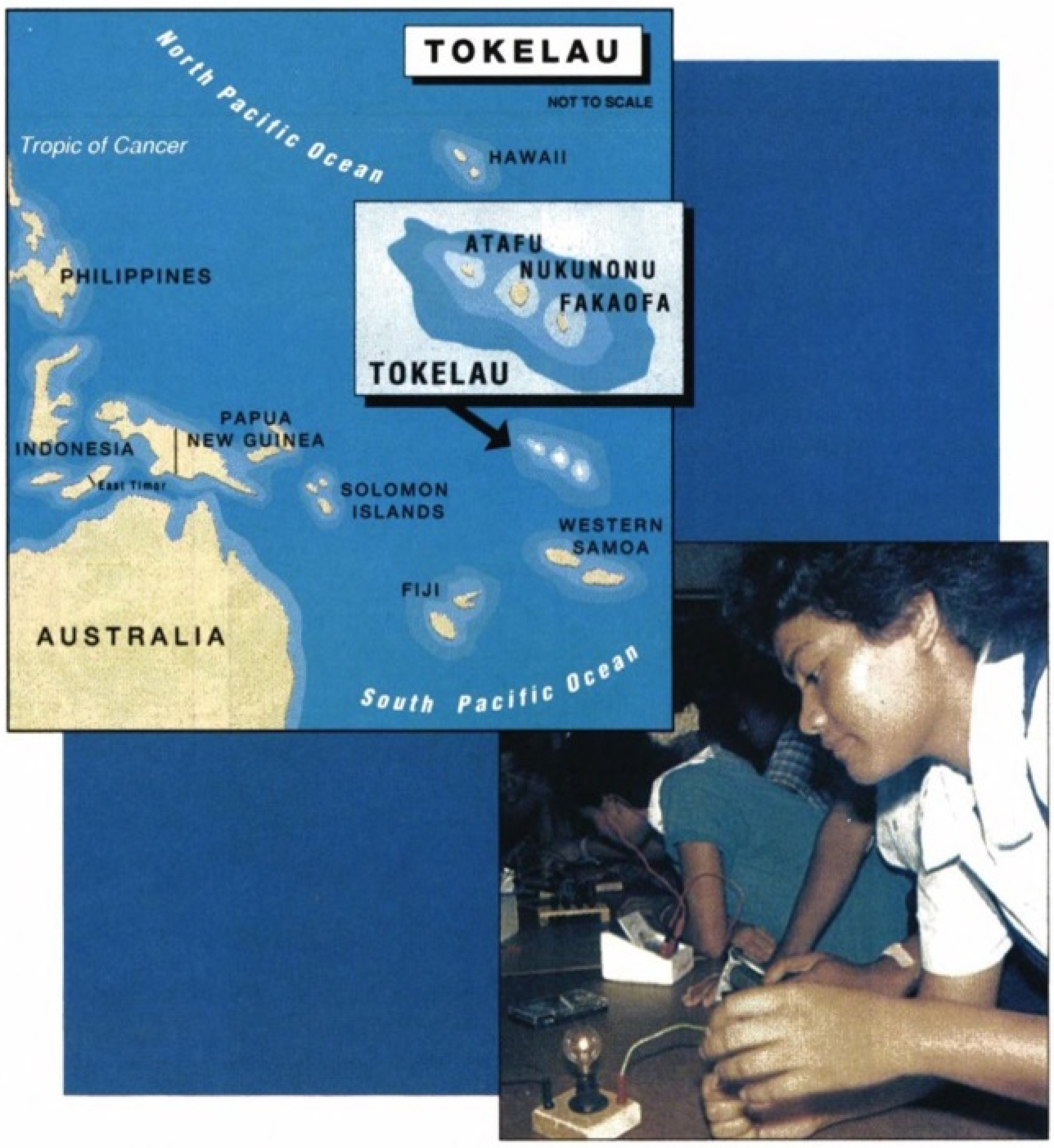
Captain Teeare Scarrott is a Master Mariner who first went to Icelandic waters on a Hull trawler to at the age of 14. He worked on a freighter to India at the age of 16, and spotted and rescued a missing Sri Lankan fishing boat on his 25th birthday. His largest command was 130,000 tons. He is currently unemployed.

Tokelau

On their low-lying coral atolls stranded in the middle of the South Pacific, Tokelauans literally struggle to keep their heads above water. During the worst cyclone in living memory, cyclone Ofa in 1987, waves washed over many of the islets destroying vegetation and polluting the fresh-water sources.

Tokelau is legally part of New Zealand. Recent changes will mean more autonomy for the atoll dwellers, as the New Zealand-appointed Administrator delegates power. All laws or rules are now made by Tokelauans or at their request, and the Office for Tokelau Affairs, currently located in Western Samoa, is in the process of moving to the atolls.

The main political institution is the General *Fono* where atoll representatives meet to decide policy issues. On the islands, the *Taupulega* or village council manages day-to-day affairs. The *Faipule* (headman) and the *Pulenuku* (administrative officer) are elected every three years. The Council of *Faipule* chooses a chairperson, holding office for one year, who is the *Ulu-O-Tokelau* or Head of Tokelau.



ELIZABETH DUNCAN

Tokelauans rely on aid from Aotearoa – over NZ$2,500 per head in 1992. They also have a guaranteed export market to that country. Atoll dwellers have dual nationality and there are now more of them living in Aotearoa, mainly around Wellington, than there are in Tokelau. Unemployment is high in this community with 47 per cent of 15-29 year olds out of work.

Communal farming and fishing are the basis of Tokelau's economy. The islets' isolation, lack of minerals and infertile soils leave little room for economic manoeuvre. Remittances from migrant workers, postage stamps and souvenir coins are major sources of foreign currency.

Schooling is free, with instruction in Tokelauan. The emphasis on education is also apparent in the community in Aotearoa with its high number of *akoga kamata* – Tokelauan language pre-schools.

On some working days, people in Tokelau may work as directed by the local leader, for example to catch fish which is shared by others in the community. Every few weeks, a ship calls at the islands to replenish stores in their one shop.

If this sounds like quiet stability, contrast it with Tokelau's history. For hundreds of years, there were constant wars between the atolls. In 1863 Peruvian slavers kidnapped several hundred Tokelauans and took them to South America. Some of these people have descendants on Easter Island, and an effort may be made someday to find the 'lost' Tokelauans.

Today death comes in a different form. Ill health is exacerbated by imported refined food and a sedentary lifestyle. Alcoholism and obesity are common: coronaries, diabetes and respiratory disease are the main causes of death. The link to Aotearoa may bring economic protection and security, but at a price. ■

Anna Buckley

With additional information from **Falani Aukuso, Don Long** and **Susan Snelgrove.**

AT A glance

Excellent	★★★★★
Good	★★★★
Fair	★★★
Poor	★★
Appalling	★

POLITICS

LEFT RIGHT

Very conservative.

INCOME DISTRIBUTION ★★★★

Cash economy small but growing. Customs emphasise equality.

LITERACY ★★★

Free schooling.

SELF-RELIANCE ★

Depends on income from Aotearoa.

FREEDOM ★★★

No prisons. Village elders administer justice.

POSITION OF WOMEN ★★

Improving as educational opportunities for women expand.

LIFE EXPECTANCY ★★★★

71 years (for Polynesia), but could worsen.

Leader Administrator Lindsay Watt. Salesio Lui is Head of Tokelau for 1993.

Economy Aid worth NZ$4.3 million (about NZ$2,500 per capita) from Aotearoa (1992/3) Aid is six times export earnings from stamps, import duties and souvenir coins. Jobs created by public works and agriculture programmes are rotated among workers to distribute income through community.

People 1,557

Health Heavy reliance on imported foods and a more sedentary lifestyle has contributed to serious deterioration in health. Hypertension, coronaries and respiratory disease are the main causes of death. Alcoholism, diabetes and obesity are common ailments.

Culture Polynesian. *Faka-Tokelau* (the Tokelau way of life) reflects a social and economic order based on community values and sharing – but this may erode as individualism increases.

Religion: Mainly Christian

Language: Tokelauan; English and Samoan also spoken.

Sources*: The Asia and Pacific Review 1993/4, The State of World Population 1993, The New Zealand Ministry for Foreign Affairs* and information supplied by contributors.

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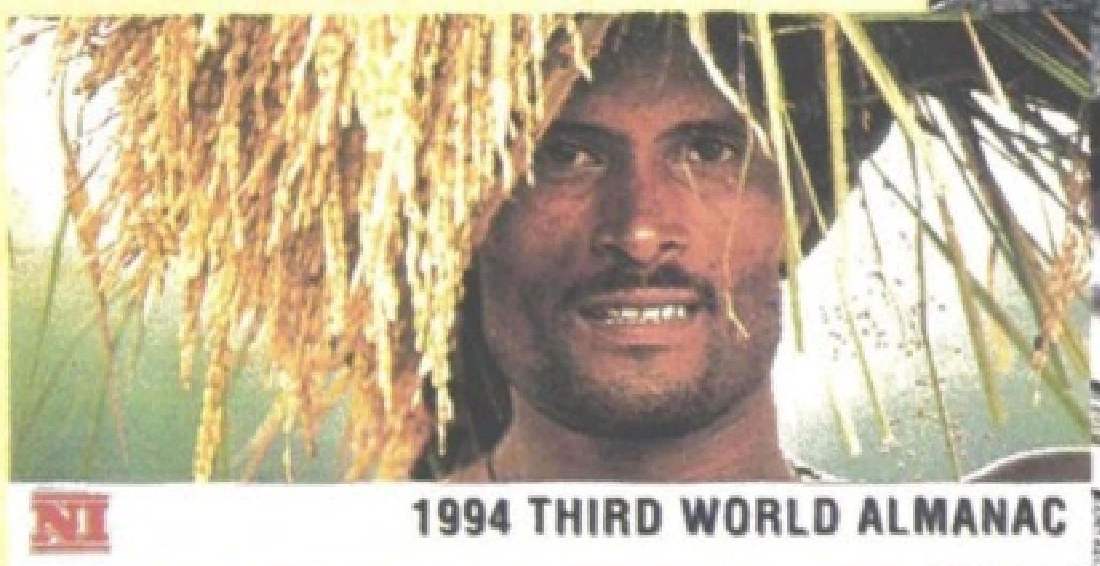

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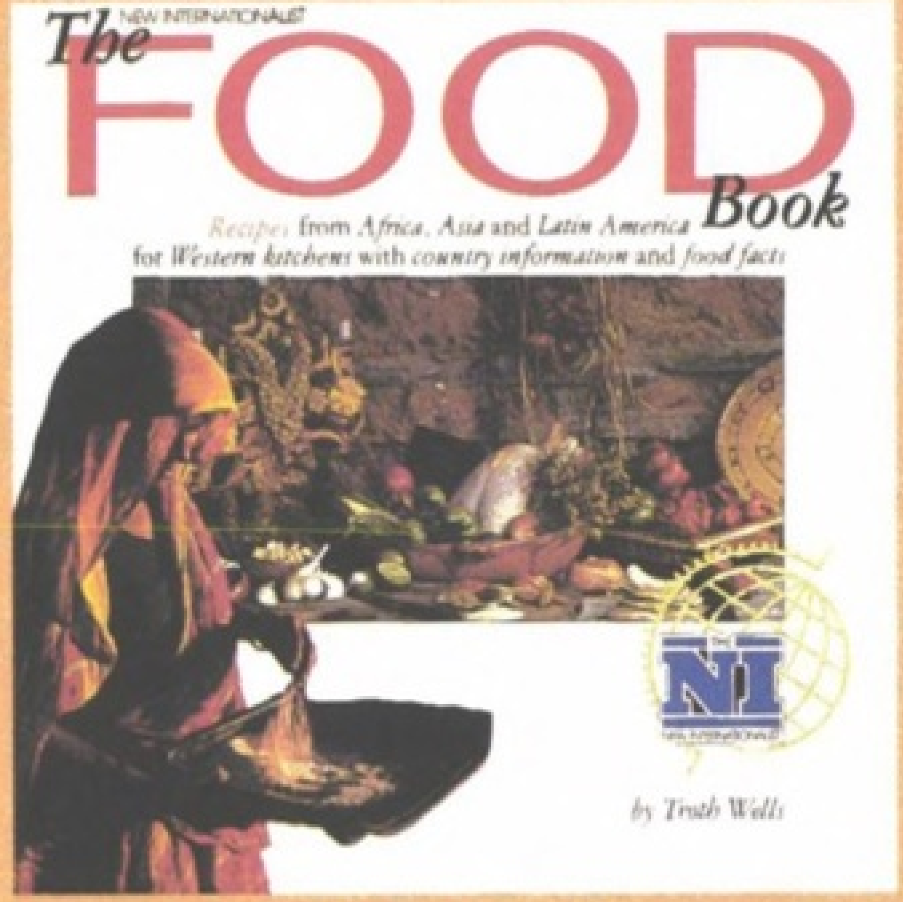
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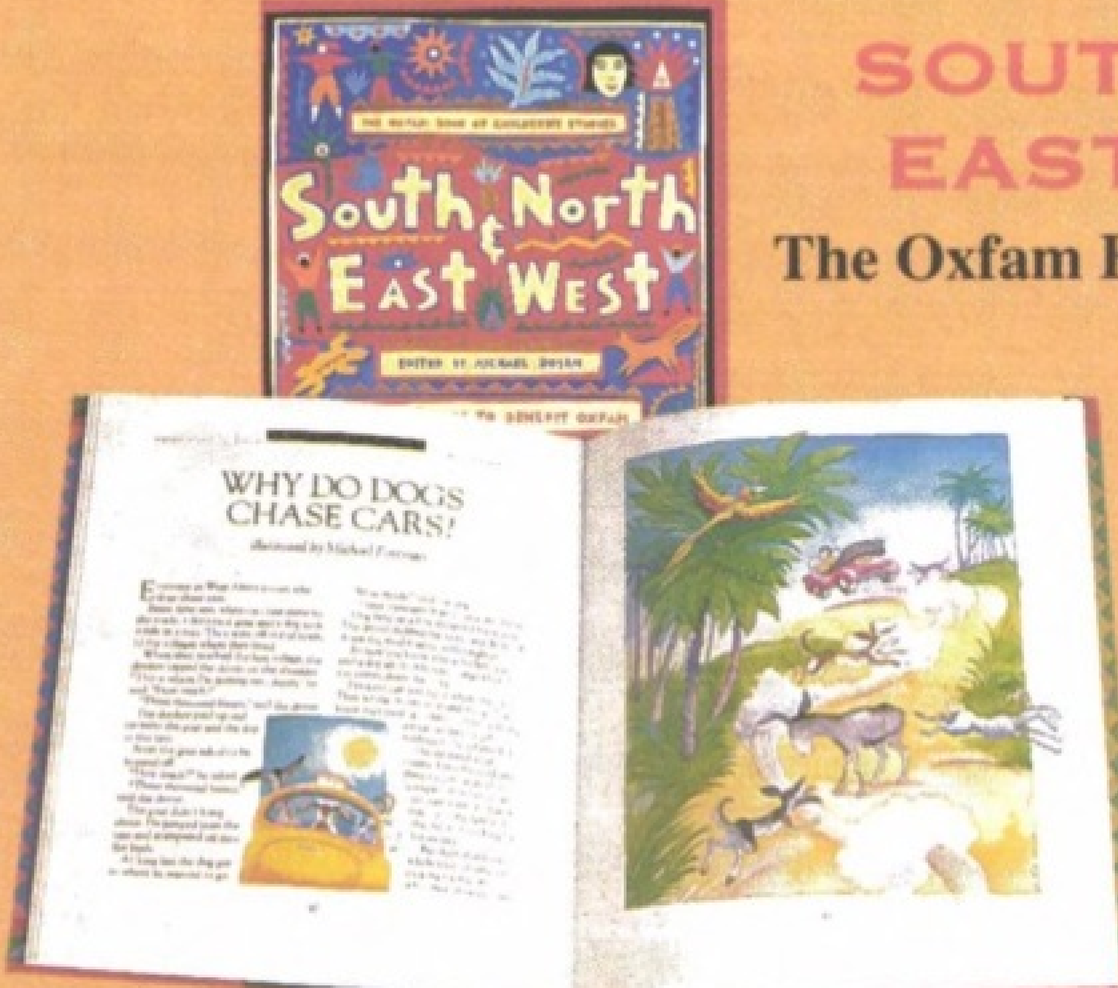

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the 1994 THIRD WORLD CALENDAR

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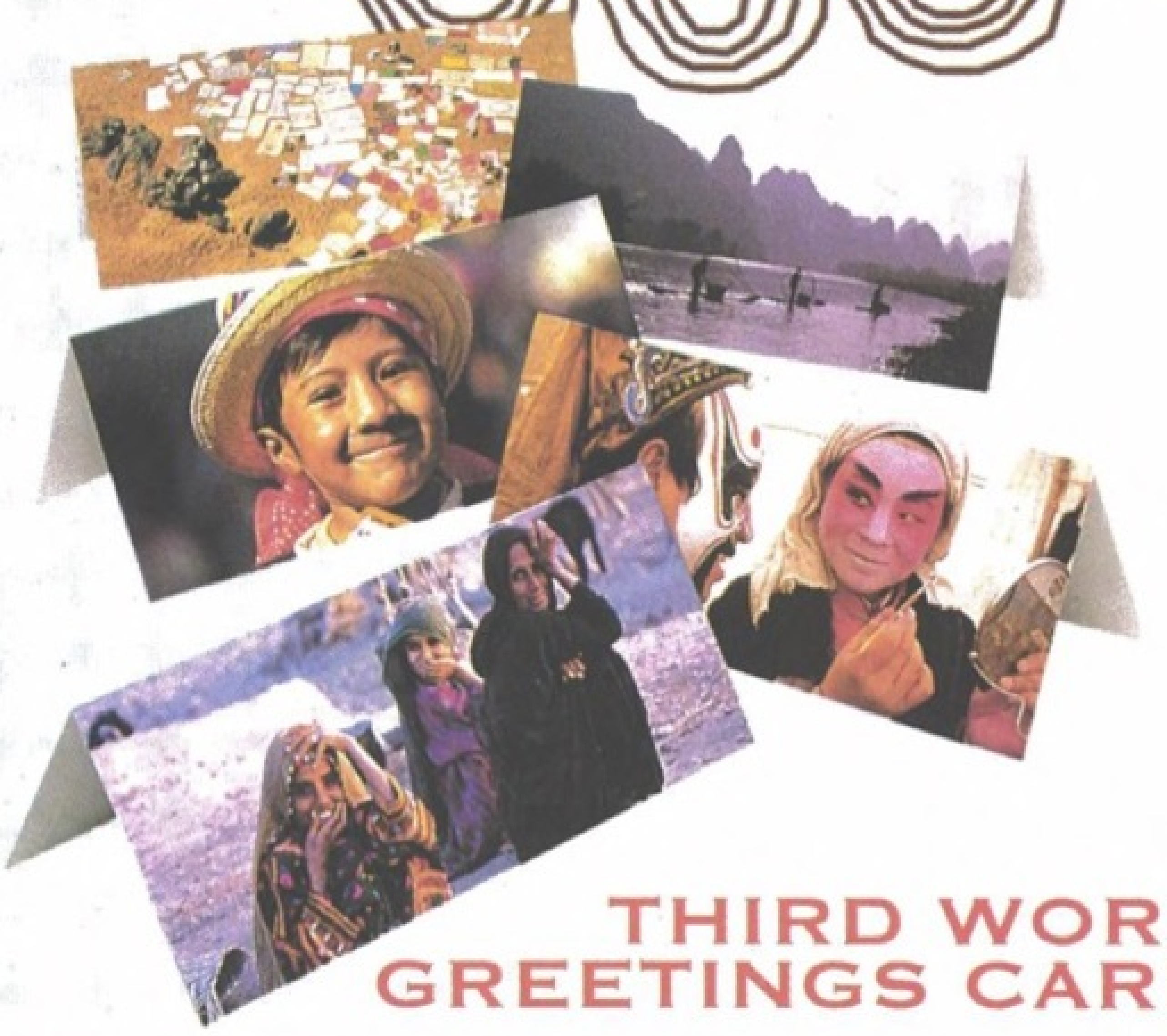

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